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DEVELOPING A CRITICAL THEORY OF CHILD ABUSE:  
A DISCUSSION OF THE NATURE OF CHILD ABUSE  
AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration into the nature and the prevalence of child abuse. It incorporates in this investigation how children understand abuse, and how the child may reject or oppose it. Its origins lie in the experiences and observations I made as a local authority social worker where children were silent, where child abuse was seen as an event, a distinct moment within family life, and with apparently little recognition of its relationship with the social order. Arising from this observation, I consider how the care of children may be a manifestation of the social order. This thesis is therefore also a critique of the present theory and practice of working within the field of childcare.

The premise taken here is that in order to understand abuse, there must be an account of the individual's sense of being, as this relates to wider issues of the political economy. Thus this investigation uses the perspective of critical theory, since critical theory can incorporate an analysis of both structure and the experiential. It enables the researcher to shift perspective and to focus on different levels and aspects of being.

Therefore, since child abuse is situated within the family, an analysis based on the perspectives of critical theory is used to examine family relationships. This includes an examination of the relationships between parents, as well as of those between them and the child. Three different facets of family life are explored: that of gender construction from the viewpoint of feminist psychoanalysis; the relationship between the social order and interpersonal behaviour from the perspective of Marx and radical feminism; and parental authority, drawing on the work of Laing. Derived from this exploration, the key concepts of patriarchy, alienation and mystification inform the direction of the empirical investigation.

The empirical investigation, using firstly autobiographies of childhood and then direct interviews with children, explores further these concepts. The autobiographies are used as a way of sensitising oneself to the issues for the child, and as a means of categorising experiences for the subsequent interviews with children. From this reading, an alternative understanding of child abuse is developed, one which differs from the narrow definition used by organisations. Hence abuse can be seen as the experience of hurt and pain, either emotional or physical, and which takes place in a relationship based on the parental domination, control and exploitation of the child. This understanding of abuse situates the subjective experience within an interpersonal dynamic of power and subordination.

Using this definition in analysing the interviews with children, it was apparent that all children experience a form of abuse to some degree. Abuse is not, therefore, the property of a small number of

deviant families. Additionally it is argued that children are silenced and rendered powerless within the family by three mechanisms: firstly by the 'privacy control mechanism', secondly by the 'ideology of paternalism', and thirdly by mystification. These can be interpreted as also reinforcing the social order, since this also depends for its maintenance on domination, powerlessness, and mystification of the mechanisms of control.

The thesis concludes with a number of proposals for further exploring these concepts in terms of developing sociological theory and social work practice. The report on the death of Jasmine Beckford is subjected to an alternative analysis, and derived from this critique, ways of confronting violence, mystification and privacy are discussed. Finally the thesis stresses the importance of understanding child abuse as a personal as well as a social phenomenon, and that it has ultimately, a political significance.



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## PART I

### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

#### CHAPTER 1

##### INTRODUCTION: THE BIOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS TO THE RESEARCH

This work addresses itself to the nature of child abuse in the family. Child abuse (1) is now recognised as a social problem, whether one is considering physical abuse, emotional abuse where a child is deprived of love, care and attention, sexual abuse where the child is sexually used by the adult to meet their own needs, or neglect, where there is a persistent failure to meet the physical, emotional and intellectual needs of the child. (2) The study arose out of my experience as a social worker working within the field of child care in a local authority setting. Childcare forms a large part of the practice of the personal social services, in terms of working with families, both of origin and of substitute, in terms of following departmental procedures to ensure some uniformity of response to various family crises, and in terms of financial cost. Underpinning this complex and bureaucratic network of procedures and guidelines is a tight



legislative structure. Childcare work in such settings is concerned with the detection, the monitoring and the management of abuse.

As my experience of abuse developed and I became aware that its management was all important, I became more critical. There seemed a formality of response, a concern with prediction and control, so the interest was not in the child, but in the form of abuse, how it was manifested and whether it could be seen, for in being seen it became more concrete and therefore more real. In my work as a social worker there seemed little attempt to understand the child's experience, or the child's relationship with a parent and the subtle manifestations of family life. The child was, it seemed to me, reified in local authority work, in that I had little idea of the child's experience, what it meant to them, how they perceived their parents or family life, or my role as a social worker. Yet I had a very good idea of what the parent thought and felt and what their experience was.

In my practice as a social worker I found parents often had a range of rationalisations to explain abuse. They claimed it was not abuse but punishment, that the child deserved it because the child was bad, they needed disciplining, they were disobedient, out of control, and it was to 'teach them a lesson'. Sometimes against all medical evidence they would deny they had hit the child or would say that the child had fallen over. The child meanwhile remained virtually silent. As a response to this I

struggled to incorporate the child's viewpoint. In so doing I found I confronted consequently, the authority of the adult world. The parent would take action to control the child, to monitor what was being said.

It seemed, then, that parents were therefore invested with a considerable degree of power, and it was seen as largely their business as to how they exercised that power. To question this invariably gave rise to claims of unwarrantable interference, of applying a different set of cultural norms, of class values or of disturbing the family in an intrusive and insensitive way. The family, it was believed, provided the best form of care for the child, and the child's welfare was seen to emanate from this, so that any other form of care was seen as second best. The family, it seemed, was seen as a benevolent institution, despite the mass of evidence I experienced to the contrary.

This experience led me to reflect on the nature of child abuse. I became interested in how children understood abuse, and what meaning it had for them. I reflected on the atmosphere of abuse as it becomes assimilated into the every day routines of family life, and how the child internalised, rejected or opposed it. As my thesis developed, this initial preoccupation with the nature of child abuse gave rise to a further question; a consideration of why the abuse of children was so prevalent. This supposition depended on an alternative conceptualisation of child abuse, one which understood abuse not in the narrow definitional

organisational sense, but one which was capable of encompassing both the experiential meaning for the child and its structural location into a specific social order. By prevalence I understood abuse not in terms of increasing numbers, but according to a different conceptualisation which indicated the subjective experience and its structural location.

When I turned to the literature, I saw that child abuse was presented and therefore perceived in a particular way. Much writing was descriptive and practice orientated, the focus of attention being directed towards identifying physical signs that would indicate the possibility of abuse (Carver 1978, Helfer & Kempe 1976, Kempe & Helfer 1980, Madge 1983). Yet there were also accounts of child abuse that attempted to relate it to economic, social and cultural factors (Gelles 1972, 1978, 1985, Korbin 1983, Strauss 1981, Gill 1971), or to the organisational and ideological context of social work practice (Parton 1979, 1981, Dingwall et al 1983).

Yet there was a tendency in these writings to see child abuse as an isolated event or events in particular families identified as damaging and damaged, while the content and the process of family life within a particular social order (3) was ignored, as was the ideological orientation of the social worker. Alternatively, the social and cultural context was considered, and there were discussions on the social legitimisation of violence towards children or between partners within the family, and links were

made between this and the prevalence of violence in society generally, but social work practice was ignored along with any consideration of intra-family relationships. All accounts however omitted any discussion of how the child might experience abuse and family life. Hence the literature seemed to reflect my own observations as a social worker - the child was silenced.

Along with these psychological or socio-cultural accounts, there were simultaneously a number of inquiries into the deaths of children who had died as a result of parental violence (DHSS 1982). In the 8 years between 1973 and 1981 there were 19 inquiries established by the DHSS, the Local Authority or Hospital Management Committees. Since that time there have been others: Jasmine Beckford (1985), Heidi Koseida (1986), Kimberly Carlile (1987), Tyra Henry (1987).

At the time of writing there is an extensive DHSS Inquiry into the way in which police, social services and health professionals work with children who have been subjected to sexual abuse (the Cleveland Inquiry).

All these inquiries are by and large organisational studies, by which I mean their terms of reference are narrowly conceived. The aim is to examine the effectiveness of the welfare services, so that any weaknesses in procedure and practice can be rectified and good procedure and practice developed.

My interest therefore in researching child abuse developed out of these experiences: working as a social worker and a disappointment with the literature. The literature did not appear to address the problems I had identified in my practice - the silent child and the powerful parent - nor was there an attempt to link this with any critique, to perhaps examine childcare as a political issue. It seemed the literature did not go far enough nor did it question the wider issues. I felt that in order to better understand child abuse, therefore, it was necessary to examine inter-personal relations within the family as well as to incorporate the child's perspective, and to integrate this with some analysis of how these reflected or were a manifestation of the social order. The child's view is therefore fundamental to this research.

The research problematic was not, therefore, to do with the facts of child abuse, but to begin an examination of its nature from the child's perspective, and to see how this was part, if it was, of family life and the social order. For the numerous studies into child deaths have made a common criticism of social work practice, observing that social workers are not child orientated. They do not, it seems, know how to communicate with children. They are too parent orientated.

The DHSS study discussed the need for specialised knowledge and skill in working with children (DHSS 1982 p.33). The Beckford Report referred to workers "indulging" in a partisanship of parents' rights (Brent 1985 p.97) and to an inability to adopt "a

healthy scepticism" towards information emanating from the Beckford parents (ibid p.85). Similarly, in the Kimberly Carlile case, the report warns social workers to "be on their guard against the risk of seeing what they want to believe". There is a further stress on seeing and talking to the child, and confronting the parents with any suspicions they may have of abuse (Greenwich 1987 p.112).

What is one to make of these criticisms? It is unacceptable that social workers are either deliberately neglectful or unintelligent. It occurred to me that such criticisms touched on some fundamental attitudes held towards parents and children, and that these had not yet been addressed. I doubted also whether social workers hold a monopoly of such attitudes, but rather that they reflected particular ideologies about the family, parents and children. It was this I was concerned to investigate for it seemed to me they were part of understanding child abuse, and until these were better understood child abuse would not be identified and children would therefore remain unprotected and not heard.

This perspective, derived from my work and from my reading, coincided with a development in my personal life. At the time of starting this thesis I entered into psychoanalysis. During the subsequent five years, this was to have a profound impact, in that I rediscovered my own childhood and in so doing confronted my own beliefs and mythologies of the past. In that process, I

experienced a painful and illuminating demystification of family life. I found that things were not what they seemed, an experience which others have also found (Fraser 1984, Cardinal 1984).

This thesis is therefore an exploration of the nature of child abuse. It is an account which seeks to examine the meaning and the prevalence this has for the child. It seeks to position this subjective account within an explanation and an interpretation of the social order, that is to say to integrate the personal with the political. I shall argue that child abuse is far more than a parental reaction to stress or poverty. Child abuse reflects in a fundamental way the values and the culture of capitalism as this comes to be experienced in the relationships within the family. It is not therefore merely a phenomenon of the poor. I shall also argue that child abuse contributes to maintaining the social order.

### **Feminist Research and the Integration of Experience**

Hence arising from this approach it was necessary that my theoretical orientation should also be personally authentic; that is to say, it should also make sense of both my work and personal experiences. This would indicate drawing on the approach of feminist research. Feminist research, write Stanley and Wise, should address all aspects of social reality. It is ultimately critical since it is grounded in experiential forms of knowledge based on being a woman. They argue that feminism can offer an original contribution. Women's experience constitutes a different view of reality, a different way of making sense of the world. Feminism not only validates the experience of the personal but demonstrates a concern for the paramount importance of the

everyday (Stanley & Wise 1983). Hence in the context of this research, my premise was not that child abuse was an isolated phenomenon within family life, but can be understood as part of the totality of childhood experience.

Morgan sees feminist research as part of a critical perspective within research methodology and theory. While recognising that the word "critical" is imprecise and that all social science research contains similarities and contradictions, as well as overlaps, he sees the critical perspective as being identified by three shared tenets. Firstly, a critical stance is adopted towards dominant methods of scientific inquiry. Secondly, that a critique is proffered of social structures and institutions, which may be described as patriarchal or capitalist, etc. Thirdly, that social science should be ultimately liberatory. It should not, therefore, be merely academic but explicitly linked with a potential for changing practice (Morgan 1985 p.209).

I understood, therefore, a critical perspective as covering a variety of approaches, but its attraction lay in its capacity to re-evaluate what is normally taken for granted and to orientate both the process and the conclusions of the research towards changing practice. The subjectivity of the researcher is also included, for the underlying assumption that the researcher's own background, in terms of experience and attitudes, is irrelevant, is challenged. At the same time, the relationship between theory and the empirical world could be examined, so this investigation



into the nature of child abuse would not ignore the implications of social work practice nor the experience of the child within the family. And since the experience of the child was integral to this research, it presupposed that the data would be qualitative, rather than quantitative.

In qualitative research the issues of interpretation and evaluation are central. As developed here, the process of interpreting begins before the interview and continues as the data is written up. Data analysis is not, therefore, a discrete and separate stage. The researcher's own subjectivity in this process is also seen as a form of knowledge, but this entails an acceptance of the other together with a reflection of one's own experience (Belensky et al 1986 p.101). In qualitative research one does not seek, therefore, a typical representation of an experience, but rather an experience is examined as a source of knowledge and as also a validation of subjectivity. Clearly, therefore, qualitative research, as I intend to use it, is a coherent and logical outcome of the particular issues that I wished to explore, and would enable me to use and develop the theoretical approach I have outlined. The writing that follows explores these initial points in greater detail and is structured as follows.

## The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 elaborates on the work of the Frankfurt School as the clearest exposition of the approach of critical theory. It is argued that its explicit concern with understanding the nature of suffering, the ways in which this is related to ideology and the social order, and the stress placed on the reflexive relationship between the researcher and the researched in the joint struggle for emancipation, provides a potentially creative perspective in investigating the nature and the prevalence of child abuse.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology and the data of the research. It examines how the approach of critical theory may be applied to the research problematic. It is argued here that the methods of qualitative research have a greater validity compared to quantitative methods. Qualitative research allows for explicit discussion of subjectivity in interpretation and in the relationship with the interviewed. It can incorporate the "gestalt".

The sources of my data are discussed - childhood autobiographies, group and individual interviews - and the advantages and disadvantages of each. The problem areas of working within a sensitive area are considered: the difficulties of gaining access to children, my relationship with them, and the impact of the child's experience on myself.

Part II is an examination of family life and of child abuse.

Chapter 4 uses critical theory to investigate different aspects of family life, to see how the relationship between 'typical' everyday transactions may feed into child abuse. Feminist psychoanalysis provides a critical account of the early construction of gender. Marx and later writers on alienation interpret the effects of capitalism on the worker's state of being in the everyday. Feminists also provide a radical attack on the effects of patriarchy as this influences inter-personal behaviour. Finally the work of Laing and his associates is discussed, particularly their work on mystification in family life. Derived from this theoretical account, it is argued that the family is a manifestation of the social order, and embodies within itself hierarchical inequalities of gender and generation. It is through these two categories of domination and subordination that the ideas, experience and values of a class society are mediated. The ways in which these are organised, via gender stereotyping, and concealed, via mystification, are seen to be characteristics of the patriarchal capitalist family and to situate the context in which child abuse may take place.

In Chapter 5, by way of contrast, present (and traditional) accounts of child abuse are examined and explanations of the role of social work intervention in relation to the family and the Welfare State are critically considered. Such explanations depend upon a perspective of the child, the family and of social work

intervention that are at variance with the account argued throughout here.

Part III discusses children's accounts of family life and their experience of abuse.

In Chapter 6, childhood autobiographies are used as a means to 'sensitise' myself for the forthcoming interviews and to suggest preliminary categories of areas of interest which will link back to the key perspectives identified earlier in Chapter 4. Derived from this reading, an alternative definition of child abuse is proffered, which takes account of my previous critique of organisational definitions of child abuse.

Chapter 7 builds on this alternative definition by formulating my interpretation of children's experiences of family life and abuse. Children from two groups are interviewed, those in care to a local authority under Section 2(a) of the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act (ill treatment or neglect) and those not in care who have no contact with social services. Using an alternative definition it is apparent that all children, to some degree, suffer abusing experiences. It is not therefore an 'abnormal' state of affairs confined to a few pathological families.

Part IV concludes the thesis by discussing how child abuse may be seen as a manifestation of the social order.

Chapter 8 critically examines beliefs about the family: that it is by and large a benevolent institution and a preferred way of life, that abuse is unacceptable, and that where it occurs its cause is readily identified and understood. Such beliefs are confronted by other contrary evidence and by illustrations from my interviews with children.

But to understand more fully ideologies about family life and the experience of child abuse within it, it is necessary to develop a consciousness about them. Critical theory's fourfold model of states of awareness of the relationship between personal suffering and the structural location as discussed in Chapter 2, is applied to the children's accounts of their lives. Finally the chapter concludes with a discussion of what forms of praxis are open to them.

Chapter 9 concludes with a discussion of theory and practice in childcare, derived from the developing perspective in this thesis.

An Ideal Type of the patriarchal capitalist family is proffered and it is suggested that further research could develop the preliminary hypothesis on child abuse as discussed.

The Beckford Family is reassessed by comparing the approach of the Panel of Inquiry in their investigations into the death of Jasmine Beckford, with the views advanced here. The implications for a different practice are explored.

The thesis concludes with a personal statement, but it is suggested, in line with the tenet of this research, that this is of a political significance.

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## CHAPTER 1 - NOTES

1. All references to abuse include the various 'types', i.e. physical, social, emotional and neglect. There are of course differences between them, and the last two years in particular have seen an enormous increase in interest in sexual abuse. This thesis does not however explore these differences, as this is not the intention of the research. However the problem of defining abuse is discussed extensively in Chapter 5, and an alternative understanding is put forward in Chapter 6, and used in Chapter 7.
2. For the sake of brevity, when I refer to a child, I mean a person under the age of 18 years. This work also does not refer to children as 'kids'. This seems a denigratory term and parallels referring to women as 'birds'.
3. The use of the term social order is a shorthand way of referring to the political, economic and social context.

## CHAPTER 2

### GUIDE TO THE THEORETICAL ORIENTATION OF THE RESEARCH

This chapter sets out the theoretical orientation that informs the research problematic: the nature of child abuse and its structural location. It begins with a critique of empiricism, on the grounds that ignoring one's own mediation in interpreting data, leads to the possibility of extreme subjectivity, which is unrecognised. It argues that applying the models of natural science denies the possibility of reflecting on one's own experience, and thereby delimits the angle of view. It suggests, however, that such research is acceptable because 'safe', as it is written up and talked of according to a set of conventions.

The advantage of using critical theory in relation to the subject of this research is then discussed. It considers, as an example of critical theory, the work of the Frankfurt School which has an explicit and developed epistemology. Hence, the intention of any research is to ultimately change practice, and this develops through reflecting on the relationship between the researcher and the researched. There is in this a rejection of the natural



science model, and a recognition that one's own experience is also a valid source of data. Finally I discuss how this theoretical approach can help to understand child abuse.

Morgan argues that the critical perspective, based on the tenets previously referred to, includes a number of different theorists. He gives as examples, the writings of Marxists, feminists, radical psychoanalysts and the Frankfurt school (Morgan 1985 p.211).

Yet what is theory? Morgan compares one theoretical view that seeks to link one set of propositions with another of a lower order of generality with a view to generating hypotheses (ibid, p. 8). The natural science mould would be seen as a goal to emulate, while there would be a search for conceptual rigour, replicability and precision.

In contrast, a feminist approach to the theoretical enterprise is more eclectic, there is less concern with scientific credentials, the boundaries of the research project are more fluid and experience is seen as a worthwhile source of knowledge. Issues of conflict, disagreement and ideology are an essential part of this research (ibid p.10).

Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School (discussed later), criticized the empirical approach in its use of questionnaires, definitions applied to areas of human activity and the stress on methodology, seeing them as, despite the user's intention,

subjective. They are subjective because there is a denial of one's own mediation of the object. Where hypotheses and schemata are imposed upon the material, he argued, it is interpreted according to a pre-determined structure, so the outcome is inevitably prejudiced (Adorno 1976 p.8).

He wrote

In sociology, interpretation acquires its force both from the fact that without reference to totality - to the real total system, untranslatable into any solid immediacy - nothing societal can be conceptualised, and from the fact that it can, however, only be recognised in the extent to which it is apprehended in the factual and the individual.

(Ibid p.32)

Stanley and Wise see data which is presented in terms of quantities and then portrayed as 'objective' as being associated with men and the masculine view of the world. Objectivity is, they write, a term that men have given their own subjectivity. They have transformed the subjective into the objective, by avoiding 'I' for 'it is thought' (Stanley & Wise 1983 p.30).

Stanley and Wise also argue that feminist research works with the "language of experience" and not the "language of theory". I would agree with this distinction, only insofar as theory becomes reified and abstruse and becomes as a conversation between exclusive members of a particular school. Otherwise I would argue there is a relationship between theory and experience, though its mediation may be unexamined.

They carry through this argument into a critique of the practice of research. Research is typically presented in an orderly, coherent and logically organised manner. It is research as described and not as experienced, and there is within this an avoidance of one's own consciousness.

Belensky et al. follow a similar argument, in conceptualising women's way of knowing as "connected knowing", by which they mean knowledge as related to and in the context of caring for others. Here truth comes from feelings within; which is not to say there is no account of an objective, externalised world but rather there is a struggle to connect. Connection however begins with an attitude of trust.

Against this they postulate "separate thinkers". Separate thinkers split themselves off from their study of the outside world. They are more concerned with rights, and define themselves in terms of separation and autonomy. They look for loopholes, factual errors, logical contradictions and the omission of contrary evidence. They do not see these two epistemologies as gender specific, although they may be gender related (Belensky et al. op. cit. p.102).

Yet by conforming to the "conventional rituals" of positivism, one becomes acceptable to a particular research community, for research is written up and talked of according to the models currently in use. (1)

In Kuhn's sociological account of the nature of scientific discovery, his examples are those of the natural scientist but his observations of the hegemony of the accepted view are also applicable here. He refers to research which is based on past scientific achievements and the ways in which these provide the foundations for further practice. Members of particular scientific communities share common paradigms and are committed to the same rules and standards. (2) Facts which do not conform to those paradigms are ignored, for they cannot be related to the accepted view, whereas problems arising out of the data may be rejected as metaphysical, the concern of another discipline, or simply too problematic to be worth the time (Kuhn 1970 p.37). (3) It might also be added that explanations which are seen as ultimately critical of capitalism may be invalidated on the grounds of either being 'political' or 'utopian' and 'idealistic'.

There is thus even in the scientific community, which prides itself on the objectivity of its research, a wish to conform and the desire to be safely acceptable. Kuhn comments thus on the scientific community,

To an extent unparalleled in most other fields, they have undergone similar educations and professional initiations, in the process they have absorbed the same technical literature and drawn many of the same lessons from it.

(Kuhn 1970 p.177)

It is this that informs the critique of Stanley and Wise, and their advocacy of the importance of a feminist consciousness to an original research. They argue for a social science which stems

from women's experiences of reality and a rejection of the conceptual procedures, methods of research and the research models provided by androcentrism. They write of the need to know, by making oneself vulnerable to the mechanisms, the experiences, the behaviours, the looks and the conversations which are involved. They state we cannot know why until we know how. This thesis confronts this issue. In asking what is the nature of abuse, we must inevitably and logically ask also how is it experienced before we understand why.

Theory therefore encompasses the researcher's 'view of the world' and is likely to reflect their personal politics and values as well as being appropriate for the particular research problem. Similarly there is a dialectical relationship between theory and methodology, the ways in which data is acquired and interpreted. Although it is true that I have separated off theory from methodology, in practice - that is, as the research progressed and as I worked - theory and methodology were inter-related, in that my theoretical perspective informed how and why I searched for particular data and how I interpreted that data.

#### **A Closer Look at a Critical Perspective: The Work of the Frankfurt School**

The critical theory has its origins in the experience of pain and repression. The experience of pain and frustration is what gives the agent's addressed motivation to consider

the critical theory and to act on it to change the social arrangements.

(Geuss 1982 p.80)

Geuss' account of Critical Theory is derived from an exposition of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School became established in Germany during the Weimar Republic until the rise of Nazism forced its members into exile. Comprised of significant political, sociological and philosophical theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas and Marcuse, they investigated both empirically and theoretically the nature of capitalism. They drew on the dialectical methodology of Hegel and sought to develop a theory within a Marxist and Freudian framework. Here I use the approach of the critical theorists in the most general way, drawing on the following principles.

In Geuss' discussion of critical theory, he summarises three theses which comprise the distinguishing features.

Firstly critical theory is ultimately intended as a guide to changing practice, for the aim is to produce enlightenment and to raise within the actor a consciousness of their true interests. But what does the "true interest" mean here? The concept of true interests is both interesting and important in an understanding of critical theory. Geuss discusses how a group or individual could come to know their "true" or their "real" or their "objective" interests.

He distinguishes between two different approaches, that of "perfect knowledge" and that of "optimal conditions". By possessing "perfect knowledge" i.e. all empirical knowledge as well as self knowledge as provided by psychoanalysis, an agent can be brought nearer to a clearer and more correct view of their interests. The "optimal conditions" argument recognises variables in time and place, but hypothesises that given the best conditions possible, an agent would be in a position to truly recognise their interests.

This can be compared, for example, with a "malevolent environment". Thus Geuss comments that where an agent exists in conditions of physical deprivation, or in circumstances where they are unduly coerced, pressurised or influenced, or in conditions of gross ignorance or false belief, they are unlikely to form a view of their true interests. This is because their environment would influence the choices the agent thought possible, and it would appear there were no other alternatives. The task of critical theory is then to open up free discussion and allow the imagination to consider the range of human activities, in the activity of recognising self imposed coercion.

Hence the premise of critical theory is that present beliefs are used to legitimise a representative set of basic institutions, and by continuing to hold to these beliefs the actor therefore participates in accepting unnecessary pain, frustration and oppression.

Secondly, and related to this, critical theory is a form of knowledge which has an explicit conceptual structure based on a reflective relationship between critical theorist and the actor. It seeks therefore within this relationship, to bring into consciousness the unconscious determinants of behaviour and beliefs. In this way the actor may come to see that a degree of coercion is self imposed, for the actors themselves have constituted it.

This is not to say that objective, material power can be dissolved by critical reflection, but rather that it can be seen as a stage in recognising true interests and needs, and in distinguishing between choice, contingency and necessity. Geuss writes,

Although reflection alone can't do away with real social oppression, it can free agents from unconscious complicity in thwarting their own legitimate desires. Delegitimation of oppression may be a necessary precondition of political action which could bring real liberation.

(Geuss 1982 p.75.)

Critical theory therefore aims to emancipate, rather than merely increase knowledge.

Thirdly, critical theory is opposed to the epistemology of the natural sciences, for as applied to the human world, it succeeds only in objectifying human phenomena. In this way critical theory can be distinguished from other accounts of social and personal reality, for here the concern is both with meaning for the individual for their existence, but as this is informed by social structure. Thus critical theory may draw on the work of



psychoanalytic accounts as well as those of Marxism. In this, critical theory accepts the Marxist analysis that materialism informs consciousness, seeing a dialectic between the two, but integrates this theory with the notion of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis examines the subjective as it is informed by ideology, and with critical theory can explore the mystification of the social and cultural world as it obscures the exploitive nature of capitalism. Used in this way psychoanalysis enables the analysis to move from the personal to the structural and to explore the relationship between them.

#### **How can Critical Theory inform the Research Problematic: the Nature of Child Abuse?**

It would seem that critical theory could, therefore, be used to inform an understanding of pain and suffering and to relate this understanding to the source of how society was structured, in its widest sense. Yet a fundamental purpose with critical theory, as within the critical perspective itself, is to enlighten and to emancipate.

This emancipation and enlightenment depends on a developing awareness, and awareness, as I have consistently argued, is a form of knowledge. Geuss in his discussion of awareness in critical theory sees this as comprising one of four "states". Where the individual is suffering and knows its source to be an institution

or arrangement. Where the individual is suffering, but has no awareness of its cause or has a false theory about its cause. Where the individual appears content, but an analysis of their behaviour shows them to be suffering from hidden frustration, of which they are not aware. Where the individual is content, but only because they have been prevented from developing certain desires which normally they would have developed, and which cannot be satisfied within the framework of the present social order (Geuss 1982 p.83),

This conceptualisation does not therefore see a necessary relationship between a consciousness of suffering and the realisation or understanding of its origins. Neither does it accept as a valid explanation in terms of a critical theory, the subject's own interpretation. For what is expressed in critical theory is firstly (and ideally) a recognition of pain and frustration, secondly an understanding that the source of this lies in social institutions, and thirdly, through a negation of this, that it need not be so. The source of such knowledge does not rely on what can be observed and what can be empirically accounted for, for it is derived from the individual's own self-reflection and the objective circumstances of the institution which is being analysed. For example, Adorno writing on the consciousness of a subject studied by the critical sociologist made the following observation,

Even if a survey provided overwhelming evidence that workers no longer consider themselves to be workers and deny that there still exists such a thing as the proletariat, the non-existence of the proletariat would in no way have been

proved. But rather, such subjective findings would have to be compared with objective findings, such as the position of those questioned in the production process, their control or lack of control over the means of production, their societal power or powerlessness.... Even the existence of such consciousness, whether as an element of the affirmation of what exists or as a potential for something different, is a moment in societal totality. Not only theory but also its absence becomes a material force when it seizes the masses.

(Adorno 1974 p.84)

So my argument in struggling to understand abuse will not primarily depend on observable facts, for facts, as I have previously argued, are 'common-sense' and incorporate acceptable, because ideological, views of the family.

Given this rejection of pure empiricism, and critical theory's advocacy of self-reflection, what status does critical theory have as a commentary on society? That is, how can we judge that a commentary within critical theory is valid?

There are three elements to be considered here. Firstly critical theory is a critique of ideology; that is, the beliefs that society holds about itself and about its institutions must be considered. They must be considered on their own terms. In particular a comparison between what is said and what actually happens is explored. So in the example I gave by Adorno, he notes the conflict between the workers' denial of their powerlessness as members of an appropriated class, and their actual experience in material terms of working within capitalism. He refers to the evident gap between the ideas and the reality, between the deeds and the words. This is what is meant by "immanent criticism".

Immanent criticism accepts the presuppositions and terms of a society or work. Such criticism judges a work by its own standards and ideals and confronts it with its own consequences.

(Rose 1978 p.151)

This methodology is fundamental to critical theory, for through immanent criticism there is a potential for transformation through the realisation of its contradictions. Through the critique of society's institutions the individual begins to realise their implications and consequences, and beginning to understand leads to de-mystification. De-mystifying the social world demonstrates the illusory character of its institutions, and shows also its human basis. The individual will become aware that social institutions are not natural phenomena, that they don't exist of and by themselves independently of the people who are part of them. The individual through the process of immanent criticism comes to realise their own contribution to the relations of coercion.

The second element of critical theory is its aim to emancipate and to enlighten. Through the transformation of consciousness, that is the process of self-reflection, the individual begins to understand how they came to act according to a set of beliefs. Thus if it can be shown that certain beliefs are acquired only under conditions of coercion, then it can be demonstrated that this is a false consciousness. This self-reflection will bring to consciousness unconscious determinants of action. Through self-reflection the individual becomes aware of forces which have

exerted an unknown and therefore unacknowledged influence over them. Held quoting Habermas writes,

Self-reflection brings to consciousness those determinants of a self-formative process of cultivation and self-formation which ideologically determines a contemporary practice and conception of the world... [It] leads to insight due to the fact that what had previously been unconscious is made conscious in a manner rich in consequences: analytic insights intervene in life.

(Held 1983 p.317)

Held identifies a series of stages in Habermas' advocacy of self-reflection. A consideration of the nature and meaning of the object in question. The employment of a dialogue of interpretation which analyses and comments on the various aspects, this depending on moving beyond traditional interpretative techniques because the subjects' accounts of their own behaviour include meanings which remain opaque, due to distortion and repression. Proffering explanations for this "opaqueness" which is constructed with reference to a general theory, and finally testing this by reconstructing individual cases to examine whether it has the capacity to reveal or dissolve distortions of communication (Held 1983 p.324). This is what is called "transcendent criticism". Transcendent criticism brings "alternative and external concepts and criteria to bear, approaching a society or work from a particular standpoint" (Rose 1978 p.151). Hence my struggle to understand child abuse can be seen to follow through this process, as the investigation proceeds.

This brings us to a third element of critical theory, that is its validity is ultimately judged by its praxis. Fundamental to praxis is the recognition that by bringing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour to full consciousness they necessarily change, for enlightenment brings the potential for emancipation. Emancipation is not however merely freedom from self-consciousness. It must be real emancipation, by which is meant "there must be change in the basic social institutions which does away with the experienced suffering and the restriction of human possibilities which motivated the agents to adopt the critical theory." (Geuss 1982 p.86) An individual cannot however become emancipated unless they have an idea of what their true interests are. That is a knowledge of one's own wants, needs, motives and of what kind of life one would find acceptable and satisfying, and this occurs in the process of adopting or acting on critical theory.

Geuss makes the point that critical theory does not however predict that individuals will use its insights, but rather they ought to.

A critical theory, on the other hand, asserts of itself that it is not a matter of indifference to some groups of agents. It doesn't merely give information about how it would be rational for agents to act if they had certain interests; it claims to inform them about interests it is rational for them to have.

(Geuss 1982 p.58)

This incorporates an understanding and an idea of a transition from the present state to a proposed final state which depends on a recognition that present social arrangements cause pain,

suffering and frustration, that this is only accepted because individuals hold to certain beliefs, and these are acquired under conditions of coercion. The proposed final state will lack illusions and the unnecessary coercion of the present state and will make it easier for the individuals to realise their true interests. The transition from the present to the proposed final state can come about only if the agents adopt critical theory as their "self-consciousness" and act on it. (Geuss 1982 p.76)

Hence I have argued that any theoretical approach must be authentic to personal experience, and explicitly acknowledge one's own mediation. It must however go beyond a phenomenological account by striving to connect the personal with the political, the subjective with the objective, the inner with the outer. Critical theory strives to achieve this, while struggling to open up and free discussion by considering society's own account of itself. The ultimate aim in any critical-theoretical account is to change practice, to develop a consciousness of one's 'true interests' by confronting, through self-reflection, present beliefs.

Hence using the perspectives and approaches which are related to my own experience and observations both as a social worker and personally, the research seeks to investigate:-

How the child's experience can be understood. What sense does the child make of their relationship with the parent?

What is the nature of family relationships as they relate to the wider social order?

What informs the power and authority of the parent?

The following chapter builds on the points made in this chapter. It elaborates how such a theoretical perspective can be operationalised in terms of an appropriate methodology, which avoids the earlier criticisms I made of empirical accounts.



## CHAPTER 2 - NOTES

1. I discuss the problem of using the models of the natural sciences 'in passing' throughout this work.
2. The concept of the paradigm as used by Kuhn, is a view which incorporates laws, theories and guides to their application. Where there is no paradigm, as at the early stages of understanding scientific phenomena, all facts are seen as equally relevant.
3. The purpose of Kuhn's study is to explain the nature of a scientific revolution, that is, to understand the acceptance and the substitution of the discovery of one law of nature by another. This account is fascinating for it is a sociological account of the scientific enterprise. Though drawing on intimate and detailed knowledge of the historical development of physics and chemistry, his contribution to an understanding of the nature of changing belief systems has been immense.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE RESEARCH METHOD

#### Introduction: Qualitative Research as a Method of Inquiry

The following discussion concentrates on methodological issues. As argued in the previous chapter, I advocate that what is perceived as data, how it is gathered and how it relates to theory, are integral to my approach. I argue here, therefore, for a reflexivity between data, concepts and theory. I show how feminist research is a variant of this, since it is explicitly written from the perspective of a woman, but that the primary aim remains - to generate theory.

I then discuss two sources of data for this research, the autobiographical accounts of childhood and my interviews with children and young people. The purpose of using these forms of data is discussed, as well as the problem areas. These were, in relation to the autobiographies, the use of static material, and in the interviews, the problems of access and the sensitivity of the 'data'. I discuss how I opened and then conducted the

'interview', whether it was, in fact, an interview, the child's impact on myself, and the importance, to the success of that moment of relationship, of how I presented myself. Finally I indicate how the process of this research was experienced and how it developed in terms of its changing emphasis and concerns.

Graham discusses the difference between quantitative and qualitative research as reproducing the public domain of the male and the private domain of women. She sees, therefore, qualitative research as being more acceptable to women since it is more concerned with the personal and with the subjective. However, she points to qualitative research as not being scientifically respectable, since it is not primarily concerned with size of sample, the replication of the study, and the validity of response from those interviewed. There is a tendency therefore, she argues, for the use of qualitative research to reproduce a "methodological ghetto" for women, since such research fails to conform to the orthodox canons of social science (in Garminikow 1983).

This somewhat critical stance to qualitative research can be compared, however, with the committed views of Stanley and Wise. They advocate research which starts from the personal, on the grounds that the everyday has a validity and is consequently of paramount importance. They derive their feminist research from ethnomethodology and interactionism, where evidence can be derived from events, speech, ways of looking and a whole variety of other

evidence. Such research will use the "language of experience" rather than the "language of theory" (or one might reasonably add, the language of the fact) (Stanley & Wise 1983).

How then does feminist research differ from other forms of ethnography? As I noted before, the essence of feminist research is that one perceives one's experience or one's evidence in a politically conscious way, from the viewpoint of being a woman. For example, they write that unless we are feminists, sexism is experienced as mundane and routine, that is to say experiences are not seen as expressions of sexism unless they are constructed as such. A feminist will, however, disturb this taken-for-granted quality, will render it problematic and disturb what was otherwise undisturbed (ibid p.132).

How did this approach inform my own orientation to the data and to methodology? Firstly, as a feminist I was able to identify with the powerlessness of the child, in the sense that a child's view is often discounted or devalued. Children, like women, are often accused of not knowing their own mind, of being emotional and immature. Secondly, drawing on my experience working in Women's Aid and having established a refuge with others for battered women, I had some experience of violent men. This of course paralleled my experience as a social worker working in child abuse.

In other respects feminist research shares the same concern with qualitative research, although conceptions of this latter may vary. For example, Halfpenny points to the differences between Glaser and Strauss, who seek for a reflexivity between data, concepts and theory, and Plummer, whose appreciation of the subject's view becomes an end in itself, or Hammersley and Atkinson, who argue that interpretation and cause are not exclusive. He writes that conceptions of qualitative data vary according to approach and the problems and potentialities in analysing the data (Halfpenny 1979).

However, a central issue in qualitative research is the recognition that the researcher must understand the subject's point of view. Becker wrote that the sociologist must assign a major importance to the interpretations that people give to their experience as an explanation for behaviour. To understand, the sociologist has to understand how it looked to them, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw as open to him (Becker in Bruyn 1966).

Bruyn comments that qualitative research must be adequate at the level of meaning, a concept that Weber called Verstehen. Bruyn goes on to say that this is more likely to occur the more time the researcher spends with the subject, the nearer the researcher lives geographically to the subject, the more sensitive the researcher is to the language used, and the greater degree of intimacy s/he allows between themselves and the subject. The aim

is to empathise and to identify with the subject's view of the world. However, the importance that qualitative research has for this study is its potentiality to generate theory. In this, I was very much influenced by the work of Glaser and Strauss.

In "The Discovery of Grounded Theory", Glaser and Strauss (1967) distinguished between two modes of inquiry. They saw the sociological task was to generate theories and explanations of the social world, but this may be undertaken in either of two ways; the "context of verification" whereby a piece of established theory is tested and ultimately refined, or in the "context of discovery". Work undertaken in the "context of discovery" is the sociological study of an area which has no clear consensual boundaries, where there may be conflict as to the precise nature of the problem, and where there is little conceptual clarity. This work is therefore undertaken in the "context of discovery".

Glaser and Strauss argue for theory that is "grounded", that is to say, that any explanation should be derived from the data and illustrated by characteristic examples of the data. Generating a theory is, they write, a process and the sources of ideas may also come from outside the research data. Their position is not, therefore, merely logical, but also phenomenological, and they argue that accurate description and verification are not so important when the aim is to generate theory. Clearly, by advocating such a view, Glaser and Strauss are inviting the researcher to use their imagination and their creativity in the

use of the data. The is not to say, however, that anything goes. Glaser and Strauss discuss the credibility of grounded theory, as containing an integration between the data and the analysis. The analysis has ultimately to be ordered into an integrated theory.

In presenting the theory, there should be an extensive abstract presentation of the overall framework and the principal theoretical statements. The data should be presented to illustrate the theory by quoting directly from the interviews, by the use of telling phrases, by summarising events or people's experience and by describing events.

They distinguish between two levels of theory, one which they call substantive and the other formal. Substantive theory is that developed from an empirical area of sociological inquiry such as race relations, education or delinquency. Formal theory is based on conceptual areas, e.g. stigma or socialisation. They are both "middle range" in that they fall between everyday common sense explanations and grand theory.

What is the relationship between substantive theory and formal theory? Glaser and Strauss write that formal theory is derived from substantive theory as the research enterprise develops. Clearly their expectation is not necessarily that any one research study will achieve this; they are rather referring to the research potential. Hence the process of the research will follow the choice of the research problem, the collection of data from a

variety of areas which is informed by the researcher's theoretical orientation, categorising and analysing the data, suggesting relations between these categories which will hopefully lead into an emerging theory. This theory can be further investigated, although they point out that evidence and testing never destroys a theory but rather modifies it (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

### The Process of the Research Methodology

It was necessary in choosing data for this research, that the issues I have identified as important in the previous sections would be capable of informing the investigation into the nature of child abuse from the viewpoint of the child. In this process of choosing, I became aware of a developing sensitivity and appreciation of the experience of childhood. I sought to integrate both knowledge as awareness and knowledge as information and I took my own and others' experience of childhood seriously.

My initial data was of the everyday. I listened with attention to accounts of childhood experience, I read newspaper reports of the lives of abused children, and I observed parents interacting with children. Working in this way meant developing an awareness to my own preconceptions - hypotheses which were drawn from my unreflected past and everyday life. Using data in this way was to work within the "context of discovery", with the aim of formulating substantive theory.



The intention here was to explore the subjective world, to sensitise myself to others' experience and to begin to clarify the problem areas in terms of collecting data as this would relate to generating theory. Hammersley and Atkinson write of the process of ethnographic research thus:

[I]n ethnography the analysis of the data is not a distinct stage of the research. It begins in the prefieldwork phase in the formulation and clarification of research problems and continues into the process of writing up. Formally it starts to take shape in analytic acts and memoranda, informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas, hunches and emergent concepts....This is the core idea of grounded theorizing.

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1983 p. 174)

This form of research differs from empirical research based on quantitative data. It is informed by a desire to understand the subject's world and to explore the meaning given by individuals as they live out their lives. Qualitative research strives for "gestalt" i.e. the totality of interplay between biography and structure. It does not aim therefore for any definitive truth. Neither is it important how frequent or how representative the nature of the variable is within the context of this explanation. What one is looking for is the "point of view" and to locate that within an understanding of the milieu. There is a struggle to understand the child's world and what is important to them. What issues are observed, what events are described, how are significant matters evaluated for the child? This is what is meant by sensitising.

## The Autobiographies

As my investigation into childhood proceeded I examined two pieces of life-history: firstly autobiographies and secondly and more directly children's own narrative of their lives. Autobiographies would, it seemed to me, be useful in preparing myself for the subsequent interviews with children. They would enable me to develop some preliminary patterns of experience and interpretation of the child's world. Autobiographies were, then, a process in enabling me to confront my own adultism and to allow the child to speak for themselves.

My selection of particular autobiographies was informed firstly by the earlier theoretical discussions and secondly by the personal considerations referred to in the above. The accounts needed to be representations of both girls' and boys' experiences and there needed to be clear references to parents and family life. The accounts needed also to be of this century as the discussion is located in the present political and economic order. I had discounted aristocratic or bourgeois children on the grounds it was unlikely I would be in a position to interview such children, and so I therefore concentrated on middle class and working class accounts. (1)

Bearing these points in mind, I selected six autobiographies. They are all of lives in the twentieth century, and three represent the viewpoint of girls and three of boys. They depict both rural and

urban childhood, and both working class and middle class childhoods.

These selections were, in final analysis, based on subjective considerations given the balance between gender, class and geography which would, I felt, give a more total picture, in terms of experience. So having briefly glanced through particular books (selected at random with the provisos stated above) I found some had an immediacy. They read well, the experiences were vividly depicted and there was a resonance with my own background.

I read all the books quickly, firstly to get a sense of their childhoods, and I then read each one more slowly, looking for issues that were resonant with my theory. I identified categories of certain experiences within each account, and then compared one account with another, looking for different experiences under the same category.

The limitation of using data in this way, is that it is static. I am not able to engage in a dialogue with the author to check out points which I would like to have been further elaborated. I had therefore to use the data as presented. But there is another problem and that is the autobiographies were written for another purpose. I had no proper understanding of why any one author had written their autobiography. Their purposes were therefore possibly at variance with my own interest and I had no other way of checking for reliability of the account. Thirdly these were

essentially adult reconstructions of childhood. In this a number of transformations occur which serve to distance both the author and the reader from the 'real event'. In writing, the author as subject experiences herself again as a child, but this also occurs according to a literary convention. It becomes orderly, episodic, it becomes narrative. The account in the adult version is coherent. The event which was subjectively experienced as a child, in its reconstruction becomes selectively remembered and is reinterpreted again.

In my reading of these autobiographies, I found some incidents which although in themselves appeared unimportant, appeared to have made an impact on the writer.

It seemed that here the psychoanalytic concept of the "screen memory" may be of use in understanding this transformation of an experience. The "screen memory" is an account of an apparently trivial incident which is recorded and imbued with significance, and can be understood as substitutes for repressed memories of often more profoundly disturbing experiences (that is, they stand symbolically for an earlier experience which has made a deep impression on the author). Freud writes of the screen memory thus,

the indifferent memories of childhood owe their existence to a process of displacement: they are substituting it (mnemonic) reproduction, for other impressions which are really significant. The memory of the significant impressions can be developed out of indifferent ones by means of physical analysis, but a resistance prevents them from being directly reproduced. As the indifferent memories owe their presentation not to their own context but to an

associative relation between their content and another which is repressed, they have some claim to be called 'screen memories', the name by which I have described them.

(Freud 1980 p.83)

Thus in these selections of autobiographical accounts, the aim was to distill certain significant experiences of being a child and the experience of childhood. To speak again to the child in the adult, and to disrupt and challenge conventional views of the child's world, so that the process and the activity of reading reminds and reconstructs in one a sense of one's past.

The retrieval of childhood memories is therefore essential in the process of self-reflection. Self-reflection is a precondition before an understanding of childhood can become integrated and part of a critical analysis. In reading the autobiographical accounts, the reader relates to another's experience, and in so doing his or her own awareness increases and a more sensitive response may develop to being a child.

Yet the child's viewpoint is a marginal one, in that traditionally and typically it is, when viewed from the perspective of the adult world, subordinated. Here the child's view takes precedence over the adult version. It is important precisely for that reason. Plummer writes,

Some of these "underdog" perspectives may persistently be denied voice or simply liquidated through more acceptable rhetoric, often "overdog" perspectives seem to be proclaimed as the truth.

(Plummer 1983 p. 58)

The child's viewpoint is important therefore because it is the voice of the marginalised, and as such does not yet necessarily articulate the membership of either class, gender or ethnic relations.

In using autobiographical accounts of childhood, I am not attempting to give a full story of a child's life. This is not therefore a case study, but elements of the experiences from a child's life. These elements of experience are ultimately described to contribute to the development of a critical theory. But here the experiences, as written in the autobiographies and as spoken to me, are interwoven with my interpretation. This interpretation intrudes on the material.

I have intruded primarily by "framing" the material, i.e. I do not leave it to speak for itself, but since the experiences I have chosen are clearly separated from my interpretation, the reader has the possibility of alternative interpretations. My "framing" has contextualised the child's experience according to my purpose - to develop a critical theory of child abuse. The "frame" is my commentary, in the introduction, in the footnotes, between the quotations and in the conclusion. Yet the child's voice is still separate from my own.

## **The Interviews**

My interviews with children occurred firstly with groups of children in a school setting and secondly with individual children. Acquiring data in these two separate ways presented me with quite different problems, as I shall subsequently discuss. But what was particularly interesting was the additional insight I developed in the process of setting up the individual interviews, and the ways in which the children responded in the groups. Hence I shall argue that the process of the research methods was as informative in indicating how family life and children are perceived, as the actual content of the interview material.

In both forms of interview I was interested in exploring further the categories derived from, and formulated from within the autobiographies; the child's understanding of family life, their concept of self and gender and of abuse and punishment.

### **The group interviews**

In the group interviews my aim was to talk to two separate groups of boys and girls who were in their final year at primary school.

I first needed to make contact with a cooperative head of a school. I had no personal contacts that I could use, so I started off 'cold' by phoning the heads of the local schools. I phoned

four and explained the purpose of my research and said I would be willing to meet with them and to explain in more detail later.

One school said they were too busy, and that they were 'inundated' with students. One school asked me to ring after the summer, that was three months later, and two others said they were willing to consider my request if I first followed through the procedure for undertaking research as laid down by ILEA. I had been warned that such request could take up to six months before permission was granted. I was then fortunate enough to meet an acquaintance who advised me to get in touch with the head of a school in the East End of London. This I did and he was immediately helpful. On meeting I explained my purpose and he agreed to supply me with the names of five girls and five boys. I explained that they needed to be white, as I felt that issues of different cultural standards in childcare and their experiences of racism would confuse the issues at stake in this research. I discuss this more fully subsequently.

We agreed that I should write to each parent explaining I wished to interview their child about their lives. I gave them my phone number and invited them to contact me if they wished for further information or if they wished to object. I wrote that if I did not hear from them in two weeks, then I would assume that they were in agreement. I also asked that they checked out with the child, whether they wanted to be interviewed. I informed them that all the interviews were to be confidential. Only one parent



replied. She said that her son did not wish to talk to me. However, when I visited the school he did choose to come along. It also became apparent that some of the children had not been informed of the interview by their parents.

The primary school itself is situated on a post-war council estate, near the London docks. There were evident signs of vandalism and some blocks of flats were boarded up. The head informed me that some of the families had multiple problems, though at my request, he gave me no information about any of the children, as I wanted to form an opinion of them primarily from what they had to say about themselves. It was an estate in which no one wanted to live, and the small number of ethnic minority families that lived there were subjected on occasions to racism. During the last twelve years community resources had gradually closed down. Now there was only a pub, a community centre and a few shops.

The head described the children who attended the school as "people". He saw them as "street wise" and that any adults had to earn their respect. He thought that they would learn better through the "how" than the "what" and advocated that children were given space for talk. Talking enabled children to learn.

I arranged with him that I should meet the two groups in the school. They were to be comprised of five boys and five girls, to be interviewed separately on two occasions. The first meeting we

would do 'life stories' and 'free association', and the second meeting was devoted to interpreting some photographs of families and children. I would tape their comments and keep their work. The tape recordings were ultimately of little value. The children were lively, interrupted and talked over one another. It was difficult to distinguish who said what.

The technique of the life story is often used by social workers to explore, with a child, their past. It is used for a child who has experienced a number of disruptions, in changes of parents, carers or schools and locality. It consists of drawing on a large piece of paper the changes and in the ensuing conversation with the child, it is hoped that this is experienced by that child as both informative and therapeutic.

Similarly, the game of 'free associations' would, I hoped, give the children space to call out in an unstructured and spontaneous way what their perceptions were of such experiences as being a boy or a girl. Hence, as they called these out, I wrote them down on a large, visible piece of paper. In my second meeting with the children I showed both groups twelve black and white photographs and asked them to tell me what was going on in them. The photographs depicted a variety of scenes showing adults with children. My aims were as before, to gain some understanding of gender, of family life and of abuse and punishment.

To summarise, my evaluation as to whether I succeeded in the aims is mixed. That is to say, some of the techniques I used to encourage children to talk were more successful than others. Children varied in their response. However, the unintended consequence of this method was my noting a particular response by the children in groups, which I have called the "privacy control" mechanism. I shall discuss this further in Chapter 7.

#### **The individual interviews: the problem of access**

In qualitative research one is not looking for a sample from which from which can be drawn statistical conclusions, or as representative of some larger order. The sample is theoretical, since one is looking for ideas, clarification or validation of a particular view on experience of the world. Since I was interested in gender issues, then clearly my sample had to include both boys and girls, and since a preliminary hypothesis was, derived from the theoretical work, that child abuse was prevalent in some degree in all families, since families embody bourgeois states of being which become acted out in the domination and control of children, then it was important that I should compare a group of children in care with children not in care. The former group had been 'officially' defined as abused, while the latter had no contact with social service. In the last analysis I was looking for differences and similarities between these two groups,

as well as integrating into my commentary the adult world's perception of the child.

In March 1986 I began to make my first contacts with Social Services Departments and parents. I planned to interview separately 20 children, 10 boys and 10 girls between the ages of 11 and 16, half on Court Orders for neglect and abuse, the other half at home with their parents and not known to Social Services. The contacts for children in care were to be sought from Social Services Departments, the children at home through Youth Clubs and personal contacts. It was not necessary for my research that they should represent any specific class distribution, since I was interested in exploring gender differences within the care of children in the family, issues of punishment and control, and the permeation of bourgeois states of being. Furthermore, given my struggle to obtain even this small sample, it would have been impossible, given my limited resources of time, contacts and finance.

By October of the same year I had made innumerable phone calls, had written many letters and had spoken to many adults. I needed to do this before I could speak to the children, and I needed their consent before I was allowed access. By October I had managed, despite all this, to interview only 17 individual children.

I would start my contact with a manager, usually at principal officer level. I would first ring them, briefly explain the research study and follow this up with a letter, requesting consent for access. I said that I was interested in exploring the nature of abuse in the family, but that I wished to understand it from the child's perspective. I would give my academic background and my social work experience and I said that I was willing to talk to social workers and the parents. I said that I was not interested in seeing social work records. This was the first stage of a very long process, for generally speaking, I was met with suspicion.

It may be argued that social work managers were mindful of the bad publicity that social workers have received in their handling of child abuse cases, but this did not seem to be the case. Rather the initial response was puzzlement as to why I should wish to speak to children and not the social worker. There seemed some suspicion, especially when I said it was the child's perception I was interested in.

As time went on I learnt to be less direct, for to say that I was interested in understanding the nature of abuse as experienced by the child was to create great anxiety. Despite my denial that there would be no direct questioning of children about abuse, that it would be within the parameters of a discussion on the family and the child's choice of subject matter, they remained unconvinced. I was obliged therefore to be more indirect in my

introduction. Hence I took to saying I was interested in exploring the child's perception of family life and their experience of childhood. This was received more favourably and I was not confronted with a series of questions or treated to an unasked for opinion on the value of my research and its methodology.

Out of these contacts with Social Service Departments, only one was ultimately successful. One informed me that such a request would need to go to the Social Services Committee, and after a number of unreturned phone calls I was finally sent a letter, with no reason given, that my request was turned down. One agreed to circulate area offices with the details of my research, but despite this being an inner London Borough with, presumably, a considerable number of children in care, there was no response. The third contact was helpful, but for a variety of different reasons the particular area office that I was in contact with, were unable to see through the suggested interviews. For example, one girl absconded from the foster home, one boy returned to a school in Wales before I could meet him, and another young person became ill. The fourth and successful contact took three months to reach a decision before I was able to start setting up the interview.

The most common response to my investigation was a silent prevarication. This was also the most frustrating because, since

I had not received an outright rejection, I was unable to proceed, not knowing whether I needed to make further contacts.

I naturally spent some time reflecting on this. It seemed to me that these problems in gaining access could be understood as confronting a taboo. Farberow writes that a taboo is essentially forbidding and prohibiting and tends to preserve the past and to control the future. For the research they present both practical and ethical problems, for subjects come to be defined as out of bounds, or the data is hard to come by. The subject matter arouses complex pressures and produces problems of varying depth and intensity of feeling, and this has a consequent effect on the investigation in terms of anxiety, anger or sadness. He writes that research on human behaviour in some extreme situations asks for a delicate balance of identification and intellectual detachment (Farberow 1963, p.13).

So what was this taboo I seemed to be confronting? It seemed to me that by asking to speak to the child alone I was disturbing a fairly traditional parent-child relationship. Most social workers have had the experience at least once, if not several times, of being blocked from interviewing a child on their own. The parent would prefer to know what the child is saying, and their presence in interview situations acts as a powerful brake on the child's free expression of thought and emotion. Yet it also seemed to me that social workers also had this reluctance, so it was less a parent-child relationship, and more an adult-child relationship

that was being disturbed. I argue subsequently that this attitude, by acting as a barrier between the child as a parental informer and an interested listener, is a manifestation of paternalism.

Another response I found was the hostility expressed towards my interviewing white children. I of course recognised this to be a sensitive area, and I was also aware that arguments could be put for including black children in my research. I had thought through the reasons for deciding not to include them and felt my case was reasonable, and I took this decision only after careful thought. When questions were put to me, I answered that since the study was based on psychodynamic factors and that I was also drawing on my own experience, I, as a white woman, could not know, in the sense a black person knew, what it was to be brought up in a racist society. Furthermore I argued the subject deserved a thesis to itself and could not be dealt with satisfactorily as part of another. I pointed out that the recent trends in social work practice, at least in the London boroughs, was for black social workers to ideally work with black families and that this was a recognition of the knowledge that they were able to bring to such cases. White workers did not for example have the knowledge of Afro-Caribbean culture or the depth of understanding of the ways in which racism, both historically and in the present, had affected patterns of child care. I felt very strongly that in experiential terms, I was not qualified to comment.



Though in the main gaining access was frustrating, there were moments when the response was immediate and positive and I was pleasantly surprised. These responses came from the National Association of Young People in Care and most youth club leaders.

My contact at Naypic came up immediately with five possibilities and I managed to successfully interview three of them. In the course of the conversation my contact said that it was rare for the social worker to actually listen to children, and that there was a need for a 'person to person' approach, not 'an adult to a five year old' conversation. She referred to Section 18 of the Child Care Act 1980, saying this could easily be subverted (?). When I asked whether it might be tactful to speak to the social worker concerned and the parent, she replied it had nothing to do with them. It was she said, their own decision who they spoke to and what they said.

Apart from this, youth club leaders received my requests sympathetically. They were inclined to be imbued in the world of the young person, knew their culture and their ways, and tended to work in an unstructured and informal way. They were close to children, were not threatened by children speaking their minds and saw their work and their loyalty with the young person, and not split between them and the parent. It seemed they knew the strengths of the child, and rejected those views of them as fragile and as needing their protection.

## Conducting an interview or holding a conversation?

Exploring children's perception of their childhood necessitated a particular approach which would enable them to speak freely in the manner and the style they chose. Yet at the same time I was interested in particular areas, which implied a certain steering of the conversation towards specific areas.

Hence my interaction with them was more than an everyday conversation, for I had an explicit agenda - to gain access to their thoughts and feelings in relation to the research. In qualitative research, a popular method is the semi-structured interview whereby the interviewer has some set questions but allows the informant to range around these. Although I had themes, I felt that it would be more beneficial to have a freer structure than this. I wanted the interview to be organic, that is to say, to develop in a unique way according to the particular relationship of that moment between myself and the child. I have therefore called my approach "a controlled conversation" in that this describes more precisely what went on. It also enabled me to draw on my skills as a social worker, 'interviewing' a client. It also seemed integral to my theoretical approach.

Hence, although I was conscious of the categories of experience and meaning I wished to explore, I did not know in advance how and at what point particular questions should be asked. Each interview was different and required that I should 'track' the

child as they spoke. Hence there were certain questions I would interject at appropriate points (see Appendix A). I aimed to say as little as possible, but I held constant throughout, the areas of interest I wished to explore. I listened for comments on family life, of relationships with and understandings of parents, gender and self, and their ideas of punishment and abuse. My aim was to produce categories of phenomena which would provide a basis for organising and interpreting family life.

Hence my interview with one child, Andrea (Appendix B), illustrates these points. I began by saying to her I was interested in her childhood. She chose to begin by telling me of a very significant event. Throughout her account she expresses considerable feelings and makes a number of interpretations as to how and why family life and inter-parental behaviour influence her experiences.

Although her interpretations are everyday constructs, from my point of view (as researcher) they can be grounded into a theoretical framework. So the flow of Andrea's comments enables me to direct the conversation at certain points and in particular ways. Hence all the categories I was interested in, were effectively covered.

How did Andrea see me? In this particular case it was evident I came over as a sympathetic listener. Although an adult and therefore seen as potentially powerful, here I was seen as one who

was not prepared to use this power. I was not, therefore, seen as a social worker by her, nor even as an 'average' adult - who may have expressed disapproval at some things she had to say.

#### **Managing the relationships: some subjective considerations**

I talked with children in a variety of settings, in offices, bedsits, children's homes, youth clubs, their own homes and in foster homes. I was not aware that the place affected the quality of the conversation, although children occasionally made references to hoping someone would not overhear what was said. On the other hand I was very conscious that it was unlikely a child would speak freely in the immediate presence of another adult. Foster parents in particular seemed to want to be around, although when I asked if we could use the child's bedroom, this was invariably conceded.

I quote directly from 13 out of the total of 17 children I interviewed (see Appendix C). Of the remainder, one boy found it difficult to talk of his experiences and since it was clearly causing him enormous anxiety and unease, I drew the interview to a close after ten minutes. Another child was hostile, and the other two children did not articulate in any insightful way on their experiences. Overall I feel that the material offered by the 13 children was rich and reflective.

I would start by saying I was interested in interviewing children and young people and that I wanted to know what their thoughts and feelings were about their childhood and family life. I said that I would be comparing the accounts of children in care with those that weren't, and that I was not talking to adults. I stressed the anonymity and the confidentiality, and said that I would change their name and the place of the interview. I said that I would probably quote them and since my memory wasn't too good, I asked if they minded if I taped the interview. None did mind. According to their age and sophistication I asked if they would like to choose their pseudonym. This amused them and the majority did choose their own name. Even this device gave information, as the child would usually tell me why they chose a particular name. I usually offered to play the tape back, but few liked the sound of their own voice. The confidentiality issue was more important than anything else. It was apparent they would only speak freely if I could guarantee this.

I would then say that I preferred them to choose what they talked about since I didn't want to ask any questions that would influence them. I would say they could start where they wanted, at any age, any event or about any person. There was usually an immediate response from the girls, but the boys needed more prompting. Since in the end I interviewed virtually identical numbers of boys and girls, I was able to observe this as a definite pattern. Boys on the whole needed more prompting, they were less articulate and less able to verbalise their feelings and

they needed more guidance. If boys were hesitant, I usually found a very concrete question such as, "What's your earliest memory?" would start them off. The one exception to this, was one of the two boys referred to earlier, whose interview I stopped. When I asked him this question, he told me with considerable hostility that it was two weeks ago when he kicked someone's door in. I took his point.

As the number of interviews built up, I noted changes in my manner of dealing with them. An early change, and I became aware of this only after it had happened several times, was that I became less at ease with my detachment. Since I was conscious of a tension between sympathy and understanding and moving the conversation forward according to my needs rather than the child's, I had dealt with this by making minimal intervention. Yet, listening with attention also meant listening to myself, my own inner dialogue, and I sometimes found myself struggling not to become more actively involved. It seemed however that this would not necessarily help the child and that it would alter the nature of the interview. I wondered whose needs I was meeting. This conflict became resolved gradually. I found that towards the end of the interviews and they lasted between twenty-five minutes and two hours, where the child was clearly struggling with distressing experiences or needed advice, then I would intervene. I did this in a variety of ways. Either I would positively affirm the right of the child to feel angry or enraged, that they were correct and realistic to feel this way, or I would summarise for them a

structure out of the chaos of their experience. I would name for them what seemed a non-sense and thus give a coherence to fragmenting disorder. I would also confirm for them their interpretation of events, which would I hoped give some self-confidence to their undermined feelings of autonomy.

I was aware that in certain cases, the child's view was one view and that to speak to the social worker and the parent would give a more complex picture. Yet I refrained from this, since I felt part of my success in relating to these children and young people was precisely because I had told them this was not what I was going to do. At times this led to my own feelings of confusion as a way of better understanding the child, for my confusion was a reflection of theirs.

I also intervened in more practical ways. One child who told me she had no contact with others in care, I put in touch with Naypic. Another who spent some considerable time telling me of the rape of her best friend by her father, I wrote to with information on various Women's Groups who worked with incest survivors. And another who confided that she had a fear of the outside world, after gaining her permission I was able to talk to her social worker on ways of helping.

Related to this but more distressing, was the effect over time that some of the children's accounts of abuse and family life had on me. This was true of children both in care and not in care. I

found there was an accumulative effect so that their despair, their sadness and their helplessness made a profound impression. After an interview I found I was unable to switch off. Sometimes the mood of the interview would remain with me for days. I was well aware that this phenomenon known as transference, is seen as a way of understanding by psychoanalysts, but I was not an analyst and I did not have their training or their support. I realised that the strength of the emotional impact that these children made, was because I was not locked into any form of support structure and therefore I was left 'holding' their distressing accounts. This was I hoped, therapeutic for them, in that I was willing to receive their unmediated accounts, but from my own point of view the experience was on occasions disturbing.

The ease with which children did talk was, I felt, partly because I did not represent any authority. My style was informal and irreverent, but apart from this I thought my introduction to the interview appealed. It showed a commitment to them.

What did I find striking? As with the children in groups, I was clearly sensitive to comments made about gender, about abuse and punishment, family life and perceptions of parents. I was also sensitive to the emotional emphasis a child gave to the comments, how much sadness, anger and confusion was experienced. Their use of metaphors was also interesting. In some cases a child's account cannot be understood, without seeing it as a way of talking about something else. Finally I observed the rapport that



had to be built up between the child and myself. A child would not, could not talk, unless I was open to their view of the world. To receive their account meant an appreciation and an acceptance of their language and their evaluation. They needed to trust me. Having partially transcribed these accounts, I would work through them several times over looking for patterns of similarities and differences. I categorised them into the headings as shown later in Chapter 7. I observed certain patterns, for example the ways in which girls when compared to boys, reported how their mothers related to them, or the constant struggle that children experienced to understand or to forgive their parents. I observed that children had complex reactions to the family as a way of living and were not hostile to social work intervention.

I am aware that some may find these accounts disturbing or provocative, and because of this there may be a tendency for the child's account to be denigrated. The powerful can define situations and decide what is a valid view of the world and what is not. My orientation to the work that follows is to be what Alice Miller calls a 'conscious witness'. That is, an adult who takes the child's side and enables them to articulate their needs and to treat their account with respect (Tonkin, 1986). The first time I use a child's analysis and commentary, I introduce them and place them in the context as I met them. This will I hope give some feeling of the pattern of interaction between the two of us.

## The Research Chronology

When I began this research, officially in the autumn of 1983 but unofficially earlier than this, in that I was already developing a sensitivity to the problems of child abuse, I started with a different emphasis. Although I recognised the necessity to investigate and discuss on a conceptual level, the ideologies and structural position of the child, the family and their separate relationship to the state, my concern was primarily with the opposing forces of the care and control debate within social work practice. Hence my early reading took place within the context of this concern. I read and wrote about the changing history of state welfare in relationship to the child and to their rights, as understood legally. This emphasis changed, and this was due to an awareness of my own history through analysis, and secondly through my readings of critical theory. Applying this approach to childcare practice and theory gave me a quite different view of the world from that I had originally held to.

Hence my concern with social work management issues shifted to an interest in the phenomenological: to understand the nature of child abuse and childhood, and to reconsider whether the abuse of children was, as believed, confined as a practice to the few. This, of course, depends on how one defines child abuse, and most definitions of child abuse are organisational ones, to enable social workers to 'recognise' child abuse. Yet defining child abuse immediately makes static and concrete what is an experience

running through a relationship within the family. I discuss the problem of defining child abuse more comprehensively in Chapter 5, and in Chapter 6 I develop an alternative understanding of child abuse. This forms the basis to the subsequent analysis and discussion in the thesis.

I write this to show that although this research is presented in a comparatively logical, orderly and coherent fashion, it was not experienced in this way. As Stanley and Wise write, the research process is conventionally written up as a description, and not as an experience (Stanley & Wise 1983). This research, therefore, in terms of its process, content and form, was not primarily logically conceived and written up. There was a developing relationship between the experiential, my orientation to myself and to the world, to the theories and arguments and absorbed, and the application of these to the changing research problematic. I therefore experienced this research in "the context of discovery".

There were no preliminary hypotheses that were to be tested, nor an 'argument'. Rather my concern was to understand the child's experience of abuse since I was dissatisfied with the definitions and the ways in which I was obliged to work as a social worker within childcare. Investigating this led to a different understanding of abuse, and consequently led to my constructing another definition. Having perceived abuse in this way, this raised another problem. Why was abuse so prevalent? This research seeks to understand this.

This chapter has laid the foundations for how I gathered and interpreted data. Although a large part of the discussion was based on a consideration of the autobiographies and the interviews, I also point out how other sources of data may be used, viz. conversations, readings and reflections. I argue that interpretation is derived from within the relationship between data, concepts and theory.

This chapter also concludes Part I. Chapter 1 elaborated on how the initial concerns and criticism of social work practice became translated into identifying the research problematic. Chapter 2 argued that critical theory was an appropriate theory from which to investigate the nature and the prevalence of child abuse. Chapter 3 has discussed the methodology.

Part II examines theories of the family, and the theory and practice of working within child abuse, firstly from within critical theory and secondly, according to 'traditional' discourse.

### CHAPTER 3 - NOTES

1. Class membership is defined here according to the father's relationship to means of production, i.e. aristocracy where wealth is derived from land ownership; bourgeoisie where wealth is derived from ownership and profit; middle class, membership of the professional class or a state 'savant'; and working class, where livelihood is dependent on waged labour.

## PART II

### AN EXAMINATION OF FAMILY LIFE AND CHILD ABUSE

#### CHAPTER 4

#### CAN A STUDY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS INFORM AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF CHILD ABUSE?

##### Introduction

This chapter concentrates on theories of the family and attempts to disentangle the various strands that make up the pattern of family life. I consider how the social order may permeate parental ways-of-being as they live their lives both in the public sphere, that of work, and in the private sphere, the family. I am concerned here to understand the gestalt, that is the overall milieu of the everyday within which the abuse of children may take place. For I have argued that the abuse of children cannot simply be understood as an 'event', in that it is woven into the relationship between the parent and the child. This relationship is situated within the family, and the family needs also to be understood as an integral part of the wider society. There is therefore interaction between members of a family and their role 'outside' the family. Although this interaction and relationship can be analysed in different ways (as I discuss in the following

section), here I am concerned with how certain forms of behaviour or being may be interpreted as abusive, and what may inform such behaviour.

So in order that the following discussion should illuminate the research problematic, the theory should relate family life to the wider social order. It should give some explanation as to what may influence interpersonal behaviour, and it should incorporate an account which focuses on behaviour which oppresses or dominates, i.e. abusive behaviour.

This chapter therefore begins with a brief summary of the ways in which the family may be understood, referring primarily to empirical studies and to the family systems approach. There is then a discussion on how a critical perspective may be applied to a study of the family, and a delineation of what is important in informing a greater understanding of child abuse.

Hence using a critical perspective, the following theoretical discussion examines family life in terms of:-

1. how particular forms of behaviour - such as gender difference, forms of violence and 'not knowing' and 'not recognising' (i.e. being mystified as to what is abuse) - contribute to, or are informed by the social order, but this
2. is linked with a critique of particular forms of family behaviour which is seen as exploitative or abusive, and is

3. predicated on the belief that such forms of behaviour are capable of change in terms of freeing human possibilities.

The first section examines family behaviour in terms of the construction of gender. It argues that the care of children is crucially related to gender. I begin by discussing Freud's thesis of the Oedipus complex and then move to a discussion of how feminist psychoanalysts understand gender construction, and how specific forms of gender maintain the social order.

The second section examines how the social order informs interpersonal behaviour, firstly through an exposition of Marx's work on alienation, secondly by examining how later writers have used his critique in their analysis of twentieth-century capitalism, and thirdly by reviewing the powerful critique of patriarchy proffered by radical feminism.

The third section draws on the work of Laing and Esterson, who use a number of case-studies to illustrate their thesis. They elaborate on the meaning for the individual of ontological insecurity, and how negation is necessary to achieve authenticity. There is finally a discussion on mystification, its relationship with parental authority, and how the process of this relationship feeds into the social order.



## Theoretical Explanations of Family Life

Research and commentary on the family has a long history, ranging from anthropological studies on kinship structure and beliefs, discussion of historical changes in the family form, sociological accounts of family functions, to the more recent developments of systems theorising within family therapy. In addition to these approaches there are the writings of the more empirically orientated, such as the Family Policy Institution established in Britain, which discusses the possible impact that government changes in, for example, taxation and welfare benefits will have on the family.

Much of this writing therefore sees the family as an institution, either in terms of a clustering of roles, behaviour and expectations or in a more formalised way, underpinned by the Church and State. But there is another way of discussing the family, that is, to consider it in terms of inter-personal relationships (Morgan 1985 p.25). To view family life in this way is to consider an individual's point of reference, whether it be from the perspective of the child, the husband/father, the wife/mother. In this there is a search for how a particular situation becomes understood and constructed by the actor, and a consideration of the emotional and the expressive as it informs particular behaviour; in this case, child abuse.

Morgan analyses five approaches in the writings on the family, although of these, two in particular dominate British writing (Morgan 1985). These are the empiricists, exemplified by the writings of the Rapaports and the Study Commission of the Family, and the systems theorists, as practised by a large number of family therapists. The other three approaches identified by Morgan are the historians of the family (de Mause and Poster), the phenomenologists and the critical theorists.

Morgan writes that the Rapaports represent a concern in the British for facts which can be taken up and used for policy. He observes that the interest in empirically based information demonstrates a simultaneous lack of interest in theory, in favour of an eclecticism which is orientated towards policy. Underlying their work is a belief in the values of liberalism and rationalism, which sees the family as progressing steadily along a path of reform and improvement. There is however no simultaneous understanding of contradictions, as between classes, or men or women (Morgan, 1985 p.131).

Just as empiricism informs much commentary on the family in Britain, Systems theory underlies much of the practice of family therapy, both here and in the United States. Systems theory is based on a model of human interaction as if it is a machine, that is members of a family are seen to be contributing to a whole, the whole being the family. Thus it is less of a theory, more of a model of human behaviour, an analogy or a description. The whole

cannot be reduced to its individual elements, for each part (person) is important for the homeostasis (maintenance) of the system (the family). The homeostasis of a family is more likely to be disturbed if the 'sub-systems' (siblings, husband-wife children) are breached. Boundaries are seen to protect one system from another, and are therefore quite clearly intrinsically related to and dependent on the preservation of certain hierarchies. For example, Minuchin writes:

Transactional patterns regulate family members' behaviour. They are maintained by two systems of constraint. The first is generic, involving the universal rules family organisation. For instance there must be a power of hierarchy, in which parents and children have different levels of authority. There must also be a complimentary of functions, with the husband and wife accepting interdependency and generating as a team.

(Minuchin 1974 p.51)

Systems theorists claim that their approach is 'neutral', but I share along with Morgan a scepticism about this claim. Morgan points to the value-laden use of words such as, 'mapping, routing, screening, patrolling, bridging' etc and the imagery of these in depicting a family concerned with privacy and invasion. He comments that such references are to particular kinds of family at a particular point in American history (Morgan 1985 p.157).

Systems theorising, like functionalist accounts, fails to integrate into the political analysis, any understanding or explanation of the family relationship with the political economy, and arising out of this, ignores the inequalities of sex, class and generation. Insofar as sex and generational inequalities are

noted, they appear to be approved of, since they maintain the homeostatic functioning of the system (the family).

How would a critical perspective differ? Morgan sees this as incorporating a number of common themes. Firstly, there is a recognition that all scientific enquiry is socially located, and its practitioners may or may not contribute to the maintenance of a particular social and economic order. Secondly, that a critical orientation is linked with a critique of the wider structure and set of institutions, these being seen as oppressive and exploitive and therefore as limiting to human potential, and thirdly, that the analysis contains within itself, a belief that such structures can be reformed or overthrown (Morgan 1985 p.210).

Morgan identifies four categories of critical theory: Marxist, feminist, radical psychoanalysis and "critical sociology". These approaches incorporate those themes previously considered. A critical analysis has then a particular political perspective which within its theory contains an analysis, a critique and a potential for transcendence towards emancipation. A critical analysis can usefully be applied to an investigation of the family. The following accounts are therefore three different ways of perceiving family relationships within critical theory. Although they are alternative ways of seeing, they are not exclusive for they do not contradict each other. Rather they are analyses that go beyond the obvious. They are constructs of theory, and also interpretations of being, which explore the

differences between forms of critical analysis. They are dialectical accounts, for the exploration and the emphasis is on understanding how ways of being within the family are related to the wider society. That is to say, they consider how the social order reproduces the family, and how the family reproduces the social order.

What is meant by dialectic? In Ollman's discussion of Marx's theory, he writes that the dialectic is a conceptual analysis which traces movement, mediations, contradictions, and the internal interpretations between structures:

The dialectical method of inquiry is best described as research into the manifold ways in which entities are internally related. It is a voyage of exploration which has the whole world for its object, but a world which is conceived of as relationally contained in each of its parts.

(Ollman 1971 p.62)

As accounts of family life, they are not intended as a contribution to the search for a theoretical synthesis. Though they share certain features which are intrinsic to a critical perspective, they also have their differences. They are based on different concepts of humanity, they use different theoretical constructs and have therefore a different emphasis. Nevertheless they are useful in the struggle to understand child abuse, since in their particular ways they illuminate every day family life.

## **Psycholanalytic Theory and the Construction of Gender Behaviour**

Gender is often defined as a set of characteristics, and these are seen as dichotomised and associated with being male or female. Stoller for example writes that while gender has psychological and cultural connotations, the proper term for sex is male and female, while the corresponding term for gender is masculine and feminine (Stoller in Oakley 1975 p.159).

What follows however is a discussion of gender from the perspective of psychoanalysis. A psychoanalytic account is both interpretation and explanation, the roots of its knowledge lying in the dialectic between theory (the account of personality formation) and practice (the therapeutic relationship between analyst and patient). This dialectic between theory and practice is fundamental in understanding the psychoanalytic account, since it is the activity of the relationship between the analyst and the patient that is the source of inspiration for its theory.

It is perhaps important at this point to say that psychoanalytic theory consists of more than Freudian accounts. There is no question that Freud laid the foundations for the later development of psychoanalysis in his theory of the unconscious, the development of gender identity via the working through of the Oedipal complex, and the 'transference', but others have since made as significant contributions, not to mention revised some of his theories. Thus Freud's training as a medical doctor

undoubtedly influenced the stress he chose to put on the importance of instincts, which, as he saw it, caused certain types of behaviour that only environmental controls could contain.

More recently the development of feminist theory has also been incorporated into psychoanalysis, most notably from the writings and practices of Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982,1983,1985). Focusing on the early relationship between mother and daughter, they have made significant contributions to understanding the development of feminine psychology. However the most politicised account of the construction of femininity, and to a lesser extent that of masculinity is that by Chodorow (1978). She asks an apparently simple question: how is it that women continue to mother? In attempting to answer this, the full complexities and contradictions of the female experience in the family and the importance of their role also in relationship to masculinity becomes clarified.

Yet in discussing psychoanalytical theory it is important to understand the source of the evidence which informs their work. Psychoanalytical theory builds on clinical studies, i.e. the analyst's and the patient's understanding and reflections of the material produced within the psychoanalytic encounter. There the concepts of transference and of the unconscious are of primary importance.

Transference as a concept is extremely easy to understand. It is merely the process by which the patient, once she or he is fully involved with the analyst, acts towards the analyst as if she or he was a significant person from the past. The analyst becomes invested for example with the qualities of the punitive mother, the indifferent father, the spiteful sibling. Hence these early experiences create a tendency towards repetition in subsequent relationships with others. (1)

Yet it is arguable that Freud's most important contribution to the development of psychoanalytic theory is his concept of the unconscious. The unconscious cannot be counterposed to the conscious i.e. it is an explanatory concept, not a physical state and refers to that behaviour where the patient is unaware of her/his motives. It needs also to be distinguished from a physical response such as a reflex, since it refers to a person's psychic reality. It is one of the most problematic aspects of Freudian theory, since evidence for its existence does not conform to science's usual criteria. The unconscious is seen to be the realm of repressed memories and emotions, for Freud argued that without repression there would be no unconscious.

Freud described it thus:

The Unconscious is the name of a system of mental acts. The justification for belief in the existence of this system is two-fold: first we are able to account for behaviour which cannot be accounted for in terms of conscious intentions; secondly, if we assume in psychoanalytic practice the existence of the unconscious, we are able to bring into consciousness contents of which the patient was unaware and



in so doing we help to bring about the healing of his mental disorder...

(MacIntyre 1976 p.33).

How then did Freud become aware of this state? Again it was within the psychoanalytic relationship that the patient unintentionally, that is unconsciously in the sense of not knowing the origins of their behaviour or speech, indicated the source of their repression. Thus 'slips of the tongue' signified an unconscious wish, conflict or a train of thought, while the process of 'free association', i.e. to talk without restraint or censorship, could convey by its subject matter and by the sequence of thoughts and feelings, the repression of painful and disturbing experiences. (2) The unconscious was, argued Freud, the link between early infantile experiences and their effects on later adult life, so in the analytic interpretation, the disturbances and the traumas of childhood could become known.

Yet before turning to feminist accounts of gender, it is first necessary to briefly consider Freud's own work, his account of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex is probably the most well known of his works. It incorporates the totality of his thesis of gender identity though it is a thesis written from the perspective of a male, with female development seen as an aberration in comparison to this. Apart from this ideological perspective, Freud held certain epistemological views which informed the development of his theories. These were not however explicitly

stated or discussed, and they therefore remain at the level of unexamined assumptions. Firstly, he held that a child's gender was intrinsically related to their biological sex, and argued therefore the Oedipal complex was necessarily a universal phenomenon. Secondly, he attached a great importance to the driving force of the instincts, which made environmental controls absolutely necessary, and enabled the development of a morality and a sense of justice. This latter however was, according to Freud, only to be found to be in the male because of women's biological inferiority. The Oedipus complex then incorporates all the various elements of Freud's understanding of psychic development.

Put very simply and briefly, Freud's theory of gender construction is centred on the presence or the absence of the phallus. The little boy, at about the age of three, discovers the pleasure of masturbation, but fearing castration as punishment, particularly from women according to Freud (Freud 1977 p.316) gives up the love he has for his mother and identifies with his father. In so doing, there is simultaneously the construction of the super-ego (i.e. the self-reflective and moralistic elements of the psyche).

What of the little girl's development? For Freud, the little girl's sense of her gender is based on her envy of the penis, and her desire to have one - hence "penis-envy" (Ibid p.337).

This supposed penis-envy led to certain characteristics which Freud observed in women. Firstly their contempt for themselves, also shared by men as a result of this anatomical inadequacy. Secondly, women's greater propensity for jealousy, which Freud saw as displacement for the lack of a penis. Thirdly, the blaming of the mother by the daughter for being 'insufficiently equipped', and fourthly, women's greater intolerance for masturbation.

So for the girl to become feminine, she must recognise her anatomical inadequacy, and in the course of this realisation she will come to blame her mother for the lack of a penis. She then displaces this with a wish for a child and takes her father as a 'love-object'. It is at this point that, according to Freud, the girl turns into 'a little woman'.

#### **Feminist psychoanalytic theory and explanations of gender**

Leaving aside those writers who accepted the basic Freudian premise of the biological and anatomical foundations to human personality, and whose work sought to clarify details of his accounts or to confirm his observations, the development of post Freudian psychoanalytic theory progressed in broadly two directions.

Firstly, those of the 'cultural school' who sought to integrate into their observations of the personality, the values and

constraints of society. So whereas Freud's theories can be seen as interpretations of the libido, the cultural school can be seen as advocates for the analysis of the development of the ego, e.g. Karen Horney, Clara Thompson and more recently the writings of Robert Seindenberg and Jean Baker Miller (1974, 78).

Secondly, the development of the British Object-Relations School, which though still accepting the framework of classical analysis formulated an interpretation relating to the child's very earliest experiences with the mother. The pioneer for this theory was Melanie Klein. The strength of her contributions arise out of her work as a therapist working directly with very young children. This was an area unexplored by Freud, since his material for understanding personality construction was derived wholly from adult accounts of their childhood, using techniques of free association, dream interpretation and transference as previously discussed.

These two strands of psychoanalytic theory, the cultural school and the object-relationists came together by the late 1960s. Psychoanalysts primarily in the USA, influenced by feminism, systematically formulated an original and provocative account of the constellation of mother-son-daughter, father-daughter-son relationships within the family. Though still marginalised both from the academic psychoanalytic establishment and also from the feminist movement, the writings of Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982,1983,1985) and Chodorow (1978) as explorations of femininity

and masculinity are the most politically sensitive and yet academically informed writings to date.

Feminist psychoanalytical accounts take the premise that personality formation for both men and women develops within the context of the subordination of women. This is seen to be linked to their responsibility for childcare, and there is thus a complex relationship between the mother and the father's gender behaviour and their way of relating to the child. Hence the fact that the woman is exploited (whether she is aware of this or not) and her freedom of action is restricted, has important consequences for the child within the family; e.g., empirical studies have shown a relationship between the abuse of women, using abuse in the sense of being exploited, dominated, possessed, persecuted, and the abuse of children (Gelles 1987, Strauss 1981). I discuss this more fully in the following chapter.

Baker Miller (1978 p.64) notes the frequency of women organising their lives around the serving of others, since in this way they can integrate and use all their attributes. The emotional life of their psyche becomes structured around this principle and because of this, if the potential to give is removed (as for example, when the children leave home or a man leaves the relationship) there are inevitably feelings of emptiness and desolation. This is more than a response to loss, for the woman's total justification for being is invested with the need to give, for which they hope they will be loved. Women do not easily envisage that life is also for

themselves. They do not experience the choice of whether to give or to withhold themselves, as a choice. This may be compared to men's development. Here, the man's sense of identity occurs outside effective relationships, the need to serve others is not central to his self-image, and he chooses whether to serve others either in his personal relationship or by his activities in his work (Ibid. p.73).

Both these attributes of feminine and masculine psychic development have damaging effects for both sexes. Gender behaviour becomes polarised in such a way that a man's feelings of vulnerability, of dependence and sensitivity become blocked off, since this is associated with being a woman. On the other hand for a woman to assert herself is to risk being labelled by her own sex as well as by men, as aggressive and masculine. This becomes even more problematic within a relationship with a man since she will fear any ensuing conflict will endanger the psychically necessary relationship.

Symonds writes,

Underlying the anger, the frustration , and the fear of conflict is a profound resignation. I found that marriage had represented to them the only acceptable way for them to have significance, and for the deeply depressed and denied self to have an opportunity to live. They tenaciously refuse to accept the concept of separateness.

(In Baker Miller 1974 p.300)

Marriage then for some women enables them to live through their partners, and to nurture the psyche in the ways in which women have learnt to feel fulfilled.

Women's psychic health is then often dependent on the opportunities they have, especially in the family, to give to others. Yet there is a myth that women are 'narcissistic', which as the psychoanalyst Robert Seidenberg points out is a tragic irony. "It has been observed that self-love, as far as the female is concerned, is grossly wanting. It is both scarce in women and poorly tolerated by society when it exists." (In Baker Miller 1974 p.307)

It is quite evident also, not only from the evidence of the psychoanalyst, but from one's own everyday experience, that many women distrust other women, they do not value them. Could this be a reflection of their own experience, of their mother's ambivalence for them? Horney was accurate in her observation that women are competitive with each other, especially in relationship with men - but the problem remains with us. In his practice, Seidenberg comments on the mother's ambivalence for her daughter and the effects thus,

It is this depreciatory attitude towards their daughters that largely accounts for the hostility that daughters feel towards their parents - especially their mothers. The mother, characteristically looking to her son for the fulfillment of her own frustration, relegates the member of her own sex, her daughter, to a second class status. This is felt by her daughter as a horrible betrayal and disloyalty."

(Ibid p.311)

Here then lies the problem. In what way does the mother-daughter relationship differ from that with their sons, and what is the father's role within this?

In a series of studies by Eichenbaum and Orbach, they explore the various aspects of this relationship between the mother and daughter and use their analysis to form the backdrop for also commenting on the psychic development of the son (Eichenbaum and Orbach 1982, 1983, 1985).

They write that to become female is to learn as one grows up deference, submission and passivity, but at the same time to feel frightened of the emotional needs, insecurities and dependencies within oneself. They point to the specificity of the mother-daughter relationship, the identification of the mother with her daughter and the consequent projection onto the daughter of her own feelings. They see that each mother has within herself an emotionally deprived little girl that is hidden and denied, so as the mother cares for her infant daughter she becomes "an external representation of that part of herself which she has come to dislike or deny" (1982 p.33).

And what of the daughter's response? They write,

The little girl absorbs the idea that in order to get love and approval she must show a particular side of herself. She must hide her disappointments and her angers, she must hide her fighting spirit, she must hide herself....A process of feeling inauthentic develops.

(Ibid p.35)



Then they make a crucial point. Since her mother fails to validate her, she turns to her father to mother her. The father comes to represent the outer world and a separateness which is lacking in the mother daughter relationship, but again the mother steps in. Since she herself remains unnurtured, she also needs the attention that her partner may provide.

In their later study "What Do Women Want?" (1983), Eichenbaum and Orbach discuss dependency needs and the ways in which these are satisfied within the construct of childcare in the family. They note women's responsibility for care, but there is little or no reciprocation from men. Men expect to be cared for by women. Their needs are first met by their mothers in an unambivalent way, compared to the care they give to their daughters, and then later by their female partners. They develop their thesis that since all women are inadequately nurtured, they compensate by an intimate involvement with their children. This further exaggerates the asymmetry between men's and women's responsibilities for children, for then men come to feel excluded. This exclusion has however begun in the pre-Oedipal period for the boy. Not only does the mother 'push away' her son to prepare him for independence from her, but he too by identifying with his father sees that his identity is not to be female. The little boy represses those feminine aspects of himself that he has taken in from her, yet he remains aware of his mother's needs and of the power she has over him. The fact is, as Klein recognised, that since his mother can give, she can also withhold. He becomes wary

of women, of their needs for intimacy which on an unconscious level the boy experiences as a fear of being taken over. The father is also active within this struggle, since his desire is for his son to become his own. Just as the girl learns to identify with her mother by working along side her, the father provides his son with a model for masculinity. The boy learns to feel masculine by the process of identifying with the "elaborate behavioural codes of gestures, speech, habits and attitudes, which effectively exclude women from the society of men" (Stoltenberg in Snodgrass p.76).

This elaborate behavioural code symbolises the power of men over women, it is the learning of patriarchy - a patriarchy linked with masculinity which is power, prestige and prerogative, and one which is necessary for the maintenance of inequality and therefore perceives women as inferior. It is the dread of women observed and described by decades of psychoanalysts. It is the system of power in the family which is based on the ownership of human property, that of women and children. For patriarchy to be perpetuated the little boy has to learn this masculinity and at the same time to reject his mother.

Stoltenberg writes of the father's struggle to repossess the son from the mother; he sees that this psychic violence is reinforced by all other "cultural accessories".

The son, in order to become as different from his mother as he possibly can, now begins to rid his body of the eroticism

of his mother. He withdraws from it. He purges with aggression. He refuses to feel it any more.

(In Snodgrass p.107)

Stoltenberg writes also of the importance of the penis within patriarchy. Here the little boy knows that he differs from his mother, that it is here he feels safe and separate, and that his emotionality which was diffuse, sensual as well as sexual and like his mother, now becomes exclusively sexualised. The penis now represents for the little boy his masculine identity, so a "phallic eroticism" embodies his whole sense of self.

Whereas the boy's developing sense of his masculinity is marked by the process of separating within the context of the mother-father-son dynamic, the little girl's experience is remarkably different.

Her femininity, her need for closeness, for intimacy, for the other is marked by her lack of separation from her mother. The daughter remains available for the care and companionship of her mother throughout her life. This then is the alternative explanation to Winnicott's observations of the "generations of women", which he saw enabled women to mother. It is their lack of being mothered that ties a daughter to her mother, and which simultaneously motivates them to seek the nurturing they are deprived of, and a validation they have never had, in their male partner.

**The relationship between gender, the family and the political economy: Chodorow's account**

In "The Reproduction of Mothering" Chodorow's account synthesises the feminist interpretation of object-relations within a sociological framework. She seeks an explanation as to why women mother, since the capacity and willingness of women to mother is the fundamental basis for the recreation of the structure of gender. She writes that women as mothers are pivotal actors in the sphere of social reproduction within the family. Mothers formulate the primary experiences for relations between the sexes, and the practice of mothering informs ideologies about women, their nature, and about the sexual division of labour and sexual inequality.

Some of her work covers familiar ground as she considers and rejects the various explanations of mothering, such as biological, instinctual, genetic and hormonal accounts. She considers the view that women mother because they learn that this is their role, that by imitating, they become identified with the mother. Such views, she writes depend to some extent on the acceptance of a "behavioural conformity", but in so doing, the practice of intention - why women mother, and of structural factors are avoided. Theories of role training may partially explain how women come to mother, but not why they should want to do so. This then raises the question of intention. Women may say that they do not want to mother or that they dislike mothering, but they still

do so, despite themselves. So it would appear the question of intention and of structural constraints in considering this choice is extremely problematic. Both may be independent variables in considering what an individual woman may choose to do. Chodorow observes also the maintenance of mothering which persists even though over the last decade the women's movement has produced much criticism of the family. The family is undoubtedly recognised as a source of oppression by women, and the task of mothering is merely one aspect. Still women mother; Chodorow asks why?

Chodorow's study is complex and involves a critical study of Freudian analysis and its revision by object-relation theorists. Since however the purpose of this piece of writing is not why do women mother, but rather how gender is reconstructed within the family and how this contributes to the social order, my focus has been on those aspects of her work that further this understanding.

In her discussion of psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow focuses on the consequences of the exclusivity of the mother-child relationship under capitalism. Her concern is not so much a discussion of the oppression of women in the family, but the ways in which exclusive mothering constructs specific gender types, and how these fit into the political economy. Object-relations theory has clearly demonstrated the primary importance of the early mother-child relationship; thus Chodorow reiterates that it is the relationship with the mother that is internalised, that it is her

care that must be consistent and reliable, and that it is her absence that causes anxiety.

Thus as the infant psychologically matures, it moves away from its identification with the mother, both because of the realisation that the mother disappears and reappears and therefore cannot be of itself, but also in recognition that the mother is not always available to satisfy its needs. Insofar as the mother's care is consistent and loving, the infant's struggle will be within the boundaries of what Winnicott refers to as "good enough mothering". But insofar as aspects of the maternal care are unsatisfactory so the infant comes to feel rejected and unloved, it is likely to perceive itself in this way. Such an explanation does not take into account the specific consequence of gender identification. As I discussed earlier the boy identifies with his father only at the cost of rejecting his internalised feminine characteristics. It is not necessary however that the girl should do this, since as we have seen she remains identified with, and feels an extension of her mother primarily because her mother treats her this way. Hence the powerful influence of the mother on the daughter, the fusion of projection and introjection, the consequent assignment through the generations of women of patriarchal attitudes. It is this process that would seem crucial in understanding the girl's greater dependence on her mother, and the mother's greater dependence on her daughter, since at the same time as defining the girl's femininity, it also constrains her from not being able to

easily define herself as not-mother. Eichenbaum and Orbach comment on the girl's maternal deprivation thus,

From girlhood to womanhood, women live with the experience of having lost those aspects of maternal nurturance. This nurturance is never replaced. Women look to men to mother them but remain bereft.

(Ibid p.52)

The father meanwhile represents a different type of parent. He symbolises another world which lies outside the family and is unknown. The father is separate from the bond between mother and child, he is separate therefore physically, but he also represents authority and social power. Since his world is unknown and a close and intimate relationship in the early important years is lacking, the father can be idealised in a way that the mother is not. He is important for both daughters and sons since he provides an "escape from maternal omnipotence". He is as important to the daughter as he is to the son, but for different reasons. For the boy he represents the adult male he will become, for the girl the symbol of separateness and therefore the potential for another identity which is not as is her mother. At the same time she looks to him to provide her with the care that her mother has failed to give her. In this she is inevitably dissatisfied since in rejecting the mother and their internalised femininity, men have not developed the capacity to nurture women in the way that women, first as mothers and then as wives have learnt to nurture men.

Chodorow comments on this,

Men both look for and fear exclusivity. Throughout their development they have tended to repress their affective relational needs, and to develop ties based on more categorical and abstract role expectations, particularly with other males. They are likely to participate in an intimate heterosexual relationship with the ambivalence created by an intensity which one both wants and fears - demanding from women what men are at the same time afraid of receiving.

(Ibid p.199)

Yet Chodorow points to how these forms of gender behaviour are appropriate to the sexual division of behaviour within production and reproduction. She notes that being a wife and mother is centred upon a personality structure which values affective relationships. This first takes place within the family and enables women to continuously care for others. As a set of attributes it also motivates women into entering those occupations which involve a continuation of this role; they enter teaching, social work and nursing. But ultimately women remain defined by their relationship with another, so that they are someone's wife or someone's mother.

In contrast men are defined by their occupation, and their link with the family determines the class position of that family. The male carries his external status to within the family, whereas the woman carries her affective, emotional ties formed by the family, outside to her work. Yet whatever her participation even in the sphere of reproduction or production, the woman retains responsibility for the internal organisation of family relationships.



The mother prepares her son for a society characterised by a sexual inequality and masculine superiority. The father at the same time in reproducing the patriarchal structure and ideology of the social order, comes to repress and to negate qualities considered feminine. Besides, apart from those occupations which are more likely to have a predominance of women, these skills in attuning sensitivity to other's needs, are not only likely to be irrelevant but also counter-productive in furthering the aims of work as I shall discuss. Thus the psychology of masculine superiority first experienced within the family and in the context of the parenting relationship, conditions men for participation in the capitalist work world .

The importance of the father's role in the inculcation of the desirable bourgeois outlook, is his carrying into the family the values and ethos of his own occupation. He defines the family's class position both materially and ideologically. This is not merely in the context however of the non-affective, since it is also his views of the outside world and the ways in which he sees his son as adult which will produce himself as an actor in the class structure again.

The father's perception of occupation, his integration into its value system, his acceptance or not of it, his feelings of failure and of success will inform his attitudes towards his wife and children. So Chodorow argues that modern capitalism requires different personality traits according to the different levels

within a bureaucracy. Lower level jobs require people who are willing or at least accept continuous supervision, they will need therefore to obey rules and conform to an external authority. In top management, workers have internalised the goals and norms of the organisation, thus their control and conformity come from their sharing of these values. They are willing participants.

So parental child rearing reflects these differences. Workers in authoritarian, tightly controlled occupations will value obedience, neatness and conformity in their children. Workers who participate in more self-directed and expressive occupations will emphasise internal discipline, self-motivation, responsibility and curiosity (Ibid p.186). Clearly such notions of control and authority actually represent class ideas, since the male defines the family's position within the class structure.

But how does this behaviour connect with, and inform personal relations within the family? It would seem women and men have different roles in respect to this dialectic. Women as mothers are pivotal in contributing to gender behaviour with regard to their own sex. They carry these gender attributes outside the family and these qualities inform their occupational choice. Yet men's identities are formed within the family for their role outside, as future workers under capitalism. They are not seen to be someone's husband or someone's father, they are defined by their occupation which also locates them in the class structure.

Thus they bring the attributes and the organisation of their work into the family, and so issues of control and authority and of conformity relate to their own work. So children are prepared within the family and within the parenting relationship for an appropriate class-gender position.

The family and the social order are therefore at the most personal and interpersonal level dialectically related. Women by mothering their children and fathers by defining their sons, reproduce the social order within the microcosm of the family. Within this parenting relationship, a system of inequality is constructed. The child learns within the family by identifying with the appropriate parent, the specific attributes of gender behaviour. Thus the girl learns submission, sensitivity and deference, the boy dominance, a denial of the personal, and an awareness of the symbolic importance of the phallus as representing his masculinity, his power and his strength.

The strength therefore of the psychoanalytic account is its contribution to analysing the most personal, yet there is in this emphasis, a disregard of the context of the political economy, against which and within which this behaviour takes place.

The next section therefore focuses on the social order. Firstly I examine how one's sense of being-in-the-world is constructed under capitalism, drawing on the early work of Marx, and then later writers of this century. Secondly I examine how the social order

informs gender behaviour, by considering the critique of feminism. I begin, however, by elaborating on how a class analysis may differ from a gender analysis, but take the perspective that, in the last analysis, class informs gender behaviour.

### **Analysing the Family under Patriarchal Capitalism from within Marxist and Feminist Theory**

In the following work I wish to elaborate on, and attempt to more fully understand the concept of patriarchy and its relationship to capitalism. Such concepts are more than abstractions, for they embody within themselves expressions of lived experience. So although issues of class and gender, of patriarchy and of capitalism may be written of in terms of their own epistemology, their importance here is the relevance to everyday life, for it is only by locating them in the everyday, that such abstractions become meaningful and understandable. This critique of the culture of everyday life focuses on the general patterns of relations as they are experienced at work, during leisure, in the family and outside of it and between men and women. It is an attempt to understand from a phenomenological perspective, yet set within a structure that can take account of the politics of the hierarchy of oppression and of exploitation within class and sex categories.

How is it that the social order reproduces the family, and how can we understand the relationship, for it is one part of a dialectic. That dialectic being movement and change between the subject, the individual acting with intention, and the individual being acted upon by the structural processes of the organisation of work. The organisation of the work process is however only one aspect, for what is important from a Marxist perspective is the ownership of the production forces i.e. the means of production. It is this which creates the specific organisation and process of the productive forces, the mode of production.

The concept of property, private property and of appropriation thus underpins the whole of this thesis. Private property constructs, influences and informs not only relationships between classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or fractions of classes and struggles between themselves, but also that between men and women.

Yet in the struggle for liberation by women, in the arena of sexual politics, there is a separate dialectic from the class struggle. It is specific to gender stratification and therefore takes its own form. It cannot be subsumed under the politics of class. It is related to capitalism, but also in parts, not of it. It has its own dynamic and needs its own understanding, its own concepts, strategies and language that Marxism cannot appropriate without violence to women's own experience. Thus this analysis of the class struggle and of sexual politics in the politics of the

everyday, in the context of praxis, is an attempt to perceive the politics of the everyday, to fuse the subjective with the objective, the content with the form, and is a confrontation with the dualist thinking and politics of much orthodox Marxism. It is an argument for the totality, to perceive the psychic manifestations with, and as a consequence of, the objective and material manifestations of the social order. It is at the same time a recognition of the hierarchies of mediation between class and gender, so that at any particular moment of struggle and of understanding, 'in the last analysis' they will be recognised as part of a total struggle.

Thus the psychic life of the individual in their everyday life, reflects the manifestations of the material world. In particular the material world of capitalism, the world of private property, of the commodity and of appropriation. It is this which constructs not only specific understandings in the form of categories of social relationships, but creates an appearance, the appearance mystifying the nature of the transaction between consciousness and the material world. It is this transaction by which individuals, by coming to know, may as a consequence change the present state of things, may move them forward and thus overcome. This is the process of demystification, by which the everyday may be confronted. It is questioning the taken-for-granted nature of what is observed, an opposition to appearance. It is an examination of the subject's own reality in the context

of the family as this reflects the contingencies and necessities of the material world.

So within the context of this analysis of the family, as structured on an inter-personal as well as intra-personal level around the hierarchies of class and gender, there is an attempt to understand how these processes construct the psychic make-up of the individual. Yet this is not a psychological account, for here the aim is to understand the individual as a social construct in the context of what is a general experience. To understand the relevance of objectification, of fragmentation as these become mystified within the family and the social order, become acted out in the struggle for dominance and control within the family.

Yet how can these seemingly isolated experiences be structured within the categories of class and gender, and how can class and gender analyses address the issues of the culture of everyday life? To begin an exploration of this, to discover the potentiality of this relationship, it is necessary to consider Marxist accounts of alienation within capitalism, and feminist critiques of gender oppression, to consider the patriarchal exercise of power within capitalism, in order that their capacity to influence family life may be better understood.

## **Marx's theory of alienation**

Marx's writings have been and no doubt will continue to be, interpreted in any number of different ways. Yet these interpretations are not merely academic and esoteric wranglings, for the differences in interpretation relate to specific perspectives on human nature, and the way human nature creates and is created by the natural world. Such a generalised and ahistoric comment makes no sense however, unless it is understood that human nature manifests itself as specific to a particular period. (3) This is in a double way; first that actual people are products of specific historical formations and second, that the potentiality to transform the given is present in the given itself, in contradictions. Marx wrote of human nature as it appeared under capitalism, and it is this that concerns us. His discussions on human nature appear most explicitly in his early philosophical writings and formed the basis of his later and more empirically based work on the capitalist process. There is thus a continuity between his early writings, the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", "The German Ideology", through the "Grundrisse", to his final and incomplete work, "Capital".

Having said this, it is clear that I do not accept the 'epistemological break' thesis of writers such as Althusser and of Séve, though it is not my intention here to enter into this debate. It would seem that such differences of interpretation relate ultimately to differences of intention and of interest, but



equally importantly they do have consequences for personal and collective practice in the world. Hence my interest in the early Marx who in his preliminary analysis of capitalism, discussed its effects on being and of consciousness in the world. The writing that follows therefore is a discussion within Marxist parameters on the notion of alienation.

Meszaros (1970) writes that the concept of alienation is central to Marx's work, and that it appears throughout his writing. In Meszaros' introduction, which is incidentally one of the most scholarly and clear accounts of alienation, he acknowledged the difficulties in understanding the concept of alienation. Apart from its own obvious philosophical complexities, and that Marx's use of the concept was variable, the difficulties in translating from German, Meszaros points to some specific difficulties in understanding for the English-speaking world. The analysis here is dominated by positivism and formalism, a tendency which I earlier referred to and which critical theory seeks to confront. However this is not merely a difficulty in conceptual understanding, for Meszaros notes that the English language does not itself express contradiction and dialectic. That is, that one term can embody within itself, its opposite. Meszaros gives as an example, the concept of human nature which is both specific and universal, and which cannot be understood without taking into account the existence of the other.

Within Marx's writing then, there is an underlying concern to understand what is human nature, and Marx relates his conceptualisation of this to the thesis of alienation. (4) To understand Marx's alienation therefore one needs an appreciation of his notion of human nature. For Marx there was no abstract man and no abstracted human nature, for it is only the social man that can be known, that is, only man as he lives in society. Following on from this, Marx wrote that a split cannot be made between nature and man, since man lives as part of the natural world and is known from the perspective of another living in society.

Hence humanity is part of nature, but as Marx makes clear, this relationship is mediated by consciousness, and this in its turn is a product of both individual and of society. As Avineri points out, Marx's concern was to humanise nature, and in doing this he is able to show what was specific to human nature. For example, Marx saw that unlike any other species, man would, even when direct physical needs are met (food, water, shelter), continue to produce and thus create new, historically located needs.

Marx's view of human nature is then not merely "humanist" or "speculative" as Seve would have us believe in his trenchant attacks on the early Marx, neither is he pre-scientific or unscientific (1978). Rather, his thesis on alienation is fundamental in understanding his whole political and economic analysis and praxis, and it underpins his thesis of capitalism.

Marx's views on alienation and his analysis of the genesis of private property are integrally related. Alienation refers to a state of consciousness which results from a specific relationship between man and the productive process under capitalism. In the 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', Marx discusses the state of alienation arising from capitalist production; that is, as comprised of wage-labour, private property, exchange, money, rent, profits and value, and seeks to understand how these are reflected in philosophy, religion, the political-economy, and states of being, of consciousness. He saw alienation as having four main aspects, each related to a specific phenomenon of the capitalist process of production.

Firstly, man is alienated from nature since the worker, in the process of production, appropriates the external world and in so doing, deprives himself of the "means of life" (Struik 1971 p. 110). Secondly, he alienates himself, for production under capitalism gives no intrinsic satisfaction since it is 'forced labour'. Thirdly, man is alienated from his species-being, for the work process changes "the life of the species into a means of individual life". Fourthly, and closely linked with this aspect, man becomes alienated from others, for he views the other in accordance with the standards he finds himself in as a worker.

So these aspects, alienation from nature, from self, from humanity, from others, occur within capitalist production, for in the appropriation of the worker's product, the realisation of his

labour becomes embodied within it. It appears as a power independent of the worker. Marx called this "objectification", and wrote,

Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

(Struik Ibid p.108)

The appropriation of the worker's product into property belonging to another, with the consequent alienation, loses however its significance, by the mystificatory power of money and the commodity in bourgeois society. Marx saw man was seduced by money, since it had the apparent power to satisfy all needs and by its action as a universal mediator between the producer, the product and the consumer. The consumer buys back what he has himself produced, if he has the money, and if not? Then, Marx writes, there can be no need, for money buys all that is needed.

For Marx, money within the bourgeois world was the supreme deceit. He commented,

The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money's properties are my properties and essential power - the properties and powers of its possessor.

Money also corrupts:

If money is the bond binding me to human life, binding society to me, binding me and nature and man, is not money the bond of all bonds? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not therefore the universal agent of

separation? It is the true agent of separation as well as the true binding agent.

(Ibid p.167)

In acting as the mediator between production and consumption, between the act of producing, the appropriation of the product, and thus labour's objectification, money came to be the 'object of eminent possession'. It was "the pimp between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life" (Ibid p.166) Money thus catered to crude need, and exploited communal human nature, it excited "morbid appetites" and human weaknesses. Money thus creates new increasingly exploitative needs.

#### **The significance today of Marx's theory of alienation**

Meszaros argues that the concept of alienation is central to an understanding of Marx's critique and analysis of capitalism and the consequent social relations between individuals. As I have tried to show, alienation is ultimately grounded in a material analysis, but that further, it embodies the totality of Marx's understanding of the individual communal human being, and of their consciousness of the world. The various aspects of this consciousness, a state of mystification, of fragmentation, of objectification and of subordinancy to the commodity and to money can all be directly or indirectly seen to be part of the economic structure of society, and therefore integrally part of the capitalist mode of production. Thus a constant theme in Marx's writing is the notion of the

individual and their communal life as constituted under capitalism, both at work and at leisure. Marx also commented that the notion of the individual in the 19th century as equated with ideas of freedom, was a mystification of the bourgeoisie, who were in fact, arguing for the 'free competition of capital'.

Meszaros examines this same concept today, now seen as a 'natural right', since it is no longer seen to be located within a specific political and social era, but as an ahistorical right, as part of being human. Similarly, the notion of isolated individuality, the preoccupation with privacy, is seen to be characterised in the 20th century as the 'human condition'. Meszaros sees this (rightly in my view) as a response to the continuing alienation and reification of man under capitalism. He writes,

Facing the uncontrollable forces and instruments of capitalistically alienated productive activity, the individual takes refuge in his 'autonomous' private world. This he can do, because the hostile power of direct natural necessity which formerly united him with his fellow men now seems under his control.

(Meszaros 1970 p.258)

Along with this emphasis on and recognition of alienated loneliness, there is a corresponding dependence on, and a high priority given to privacy. The experience of being private, of being separate from others, is however at a cost, the cost being as Meszaros points out, a further mystification with an intensifying cult of "individual autonomy". Freedom is now perceived as being free from the constraints of social ties and relations, so the individual is understood as an abstraction outside the social

world. Any appeal outside this dichotomised experience, the individual as separate from society, is seen as interference. Thus Meszaros writes, "self seeking egotistic fulfilment" is represented as "ethical glorification" (Ibid. p.258). Nowhere is this mystification, this idealisation of privacy, of the rights of the individual, more apparent than in the modern family. The family represents for the isolated individual, a legitimated place where they may withdraw from society. The family seems not of society, yet this belief represents further mystification, for it serves to conceal the exploiting and objective nature of the capitalist world. For the family is a part of capitalism, and contrary to its own mythology, reproduces within itself, the alienation, the objectification and the exploitation of the world outside.

The family, as embodying the ideologies of individualism, of consumerism and of autonomy, serves its own mystifying purposes both for its own members and for the social order. On the one hand it protects the established order against 'challenge by the rabble', as witness the many appeals to the family to control and discipline the young, to prevent delinquency and to control the 'criminal element' who take to the street in the latest round of rioting. The family is expected to and will police itself.

Secondly, it provides an apparent arena of escape which becomes subjectively a means of spurious fulfilment for the isolated and powerless individual (Ibid. p.262).

These observations are replicated in Tolson's discussion of masculinity. Tolson discusses men, their participation in the capitalistic work process, their identification with particular forms of masculinity, and their role in the family, and sees this as reflecting the nature and the organisation of their work (Tolson 1978).

Tolson perceives that a masculine identity is integral to a man's total being. Through working, he earns money, power and personal independence from the family. Definitions of his masculinity enter into the way he personally experiences his work, but since the organisation of work under capitalism is, as we have seen, fragmenting, alienating and objectifying, the man carries within him these profoundly negating states of being. Tolson's argument is based on the premise that work for a man has therefore a different meaning, has a profound significance compared to that of women's. This is not to say that this is integral to the nature of being a man or a woman, but their perception of waged labour differs from that of women, since their masculine identity is constructed and derived from within it.

This is a fundamental aspect of the gendered division of labour under capitalism, and this sociological view is congruent with the clinical studies and theories of gender in psychoanalysis, as discussed earlier. Tolson, as does Chodorow, differentiates between working class masculinity and the masculinity of the middle classes, and he relates these differences to their work.



For the manual worker, on the shop floor or on the assembly line, there is immediate alienation. The production process is fragmenting with extreme division of labour, the product is objectified, and the control of the worker and of the work process is direct and humiliating. Because of this, Tolson argues, the worker develops a number of 'masculine' compensations, to reassert even if temporary, collective control, and this includes sabotaging the production process itself. For example, he noted that at work a specific style of conduct was developed, dependent on quick wit and verbal reactions, and rapid changes of task which enabled the man to develop a certain status. Expressions of male sexuality were also another way of coping with humiliation, and though Tolson does not make this point explicit, it is invariably at the expense of women. Tolson writes:

The significance, in this context, of sexual symbolism, is its ability to unite the collective and the personal - to provide both a continuous diversion, and a psychological defence. In its repetition it points to an underlying insecurity; the seemingly innocent jokes have a force they cannot control. It is as if the worker despises his own sexuality - in the same moment as he reaffirms his commitment to work.

(Ibid p.61)

Given this rather bleak view of factory work, what significance does the family have?

As might be expected from the earlier discussions of Meszaros, the home and the family for the working class male, represents precisely those aspects earlier defined, of privacy, of autonomy - all the mystifications of a bourgeois ideology. However Tolson

give these abstractions a new significance. He notes how these beliefs, of privacy and of autonomy are structured within the home, and how they come to construct a specific relationship between the husband and the wife; a patriarchal relationship.

the notions of the 'compassionate' family life-style, in perfect balance to alienation from work, itself reproduces an entrenched, traditional masculine attitude to the family - that is be as far as possible 'trouble free'. (Typically, the working class man views the world of the family in a different light to other social relationships.) Whereas at work he is individually powerless, at home he has personal influence and recognition. He goes out to work for others (the wife and family) partly on the condition that they, in return, reaffirm his patriarchal status.

(Ibid p.68)

Tolson rightly perceives this work/home balance as problematic, since it clearly entrenches the personally and socially negating, alienating nature of capitalism. Thus within the family, the man's insistence on 'peace' and on 'harmony' is a defence not only of male supremacy, but also reasserts the male's loss of status and authority at work. Yet this massive denial of conflict, of alienation by men at work is at the expense of women who to maintain the uneasy balance are constrained to take on for men, within the home, the oppressions and exploitations of patriarchal capitalism. So do women learn to placate.

Middle class forms of masculinity are similarly structured, in that the male also has an over-riding commitment to work, which is also supported by an idealised image of 'home'. Unlike the working class, however, there is a sense of duty for his work, his work is disciplined not by external controls but by his own internalised

controls - he is self-disciplined. He has a career and a salary and works by appointment.

The middle class male has a self-consciousness about his family, which is seen as an area of stability and decency in an increasingly insecure world. The middle class male has aspirations to be a good father, and part of this is his desire for his son to devote himself, like his father, to achieve. There is a concern for respectability, for conformity and that his children should be well mannered. They should respect him and moreover they should love him. He has all the answers, he sets a premium on his own assumed high ability to make correct judgements and to make decisions. He is incapable of admitting ignorance, he has an opinion on everything, and what he does not know, can be concealed with a stream of 'endless rationalisations'.

As husband and father, he is the subject of an ideology to which his wife and children are the objects - of his concern, his protection, his authority.

(Ibid p.95)

This objectification of his wife is further demonstrated in his sexual attitudes towards her. He places his wife in a double bind, she is both an 'angel' and a 'femme fatale', and this ambivalence is also reflected outside the family, symbolised in cultural representations of women's sexuality as the 'whore/Virgin Mary' dichotomy.

So far we have been considering the experience of the working male, but what of the unemployed? Given that a man's identity is formed

through his participation in the productive process, we might assume that for the male without work, the effects are devastating. We might also predict the consequences for women and children in maintaining this 'brutal bargain' (i.e. the balance between work and home life) is to be put under greater stress, and greater pressure to compensate for the male loss. After all, the male wage does not only buy commodities, it also represents as Tolson points out, his social presence. If this is destroyed, his personality is also undermined.

The relationship between personality construction and the material processes of capitalism is examined in the context of unemployment, by Leonard (1984). He distinguishes between the voluntary unemployed and the much larger group, the involuntary unemployed; interestingly grouping within this group those with disabilities and the elderly. Leonard's categorisation is based on a class analysis, and he thus does not take into account the differences of meaning that work has for men and women, and the way that women's and men's work is differentially located within capitalism. However his argument is based on the similarities that being without work has on the development of particular personality characteristics. He notes the relationship of gender expectations of female and male behaviour in the family, and at work, but comments that the unemployed (the unwaged, the elderly, the disabled) are both subordinate and marginal to the larger social order.

Drawing on Seve's materialist categorisation of the relationship between work time and leisure time, and how the former influences the latter, Leonard points to the generalised experience of stigma which develops, and notes how this experience comes to define relationships within people. He first examines the material aspects, that those without work have to depend on state benefits and that poverty is an ever present experience. Along with this material deprivation go feelings of loss, since there is an awareness that being outside of production is seen negatively, as well as being experienced in this way.

Leisure activities also do not compensate, for as Leonard perceives, just as use of time outside work reflects work demands, so perceived, alienating work tends to produce a passive and alienating use of leisure. When therefore there is total availability of time, as with the unemployed, there is no burst of activity or spontaneity; rather there is a temptation to sleep through the dull monotony of a day which is unpunctuated by any work timetable. Thus the guilt, loneliness and feelings of worthlessness become overwhelming. (Ibid. p.187)

What are the effects on the personality? For men, there is clearly a loss of identity since it represents the loss of the conception of oneself as breadwinner. Leonard comments:

A self-image of worthlessness involves at one level an internalisation of an ideological evaluation, and at another level the turning-in upon oneself of the anger which is experienced at this ideological evaluation.

(Ibid. p.192)

Yet this analysis of of personality development under capitalism also applies to women, for women habitually have feelings of worthlessness and of turned in anger. A link can therefore be made between the social lack of recognition of worth, an internalisation of this worthlessness and the consequent anger which denied any effective expression, becomes turned in on oneself. Differences occur however in how these feelings are dealt with by men and women, since as I shall argue, the expression of anger is legitimated socially and personally for men, but is controlled, contained and hence repressed by women. It is to a fuller discussion of these gender differences as they are reflected in society and then in the family, that I now turn, considering how the concept of alienation may be transformed within feminist theory.

#### **Feminism as a critique of everyday life**

Central to a feminist analysis is a discussion of patriarchy, a concept that may be defined anthropologically: control and power lying in the hands of the father, or sociologically: control and power lying in the hands of men. However such definitions conceal ways of perceiving the problem of men, and of understanding, defining and explaining their power over women. Feminist theory also incorporates differences of analysis, these being broadly grouped into radical feminism, and socialist feminism.

The concern for the radical feminist has primarily been to understand, and to speak of women's oppression in the context of their relationship with men, to define the boundaries of their control over women, and writing and speaking as women, to articulate their anger and their experiences of patriarchy. It is a literature of engagement, of despair, of protest, but it has nevertheless become an articulated anger. It is an anger that has motivated groups of resistance to male violence; the Women's Aid Refuges, the Rape Crisis Centres, the Incest Survivors Groups.

The work of socialist feminists by contrast stands in an uneasy and ambivalent relationship with a class analysis and with class organised political parties. Theories are derived by adopting Marxist categories, the Marx found in 'Capital' and his later works, and to explain the specific aspects of patriarchy with capitalism (Sargent 1981, Eisenstein 1979). Yet it is evident that Marxism used in this way, narrowly interpreting 'materialism', cannot explain women's experience of men, so the analysis has focused on what it can explain. In other words the theory has dictated the areas of interest. Hence the debates on the role of domestic labour under capitalism, (5) its contribution to capital, its relationship to either use-value or exchange value, gender division of labour at home and work, and derived from these differences of interest; whether sexual politics are a diversion from class politics.

The problem is thus defined in a particular way: it is not the problem of men, but the problem for men and women within a class society. The analysis focuses more on the greater exploitation (in the Marxist economic sense) of women, while the oppression of women (in the psychic and political sense) is elided. Socialist feminism has therefore little to say on the experiential and the subjective, for the focus of concern is on material reality.

Such an approach may be contrasted with the following commentaries on violence towards women. Brownmiller writes on rape, the Dobashes on domestic violence, and Dworkin on pornography. It is their writing that enables one in the context of this research to better understand the nature of abuse since both the personal experience and the political context are considered in their account.

#### **Rape as a manifestation of patriarchy**

Brownmiller sees rape as a massive crime against women because of its enduring significance, its effect on women of all ages, of all races and throughout history. Viewed in this way, it has been and is virtually ignored. She comments on the silence in the writings of the historians, in the writings of the war journalists, and in the writings of the psycho-analysts, including the most famous of them all, Freud. For Brownmiller, it is the male's physical ability to rape that explains rape. She writes:



rape became not only a male prerogative, but a man's basic weapon of force against women, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his physical conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood.

(Ibid. p.14)

She sees rape as a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. The fact that all men do not have to rape is irrelevant for they all benefit from those that do. She notes that rape is invariably used in war time, not occasionally, but habitually, to prove manhood and as a reward in victory. Rape was common in World War 1, in World War 11, in Bangladesh and in Vietnam. It is practised in periods of mob violence, whites against blacks and blacks against whites. It is sexual crime and is indicative of the powerlessness of women and the legitimated power and destruction of the male. Brownmiller points to war as enabling men to give vent to their contempt for women, at the same time confirming the very worst attributes of machismo; the respect for law and order at whatever cost, the inculcated respect for brutal authority, and their contempt for those outside the hierarchies of dominance. In such a culture of violence, women are not worthy of respect or are not seen as human. She comments:

War provides men with the perfect psychologic backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. The very maleness of the military - the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of the hierarchy's command - confirms for men what they suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the

world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the centre ring.

(Ibid p.32)

Yet rape is as common in 'peace' time, as Brownmiller's citation of Amir's ten year study of rape demonstrates. In analysing 646 cases, he found that the majority of rapes occurred in the home, that 71% of them were planned, and that 43% take place in pairs or groups. Commenting on the supposed pathology of the rapist, Amir concluded there was "no separate identifiable pathology aside from the individual quirks and personality disturbances that might characterise any single offender who commits any sort of crime" (Ibid. p.181).

Hence rape is 'normal' in that it is a particularly effective way of controlling, dominating and humiliating women, though in many cases as Brownmiller makes clear, the actual act of intercourse is but a small part in the degradation of women. Rape also includes the use of instruments, urinating or defecating on women, and forcing them, at the threat of disfigurement or murder, into fellatio.

If the average rapist shares the same characteristics as the average offender, what of the victim? Brownmiller also analyses the psychology of the victim. She notes that women are from childhood trained to perceive themselves as victims, so that a fear of men and boys become part of their unconscious. Men meanwhile

are imbued with a mythology that all women secretly want rape, thus legitimating the blame for their own activity on the victim.

Yet despite the mass of evidence that Brownmiller discusses, she fails to comment on the fact that rape within marriage is not regarded as a crime. Here the law legitimates the male control and ownership of the woman's body, for it is assumed to be there for his use. The family is, as previously noted, the institution wherein patriarchy may be practised and where it is moreover, legitimated. It is within the family that the male has total control over women and children, and where because of its privacy and its autonomy the most extreme brutality can occur every day.

#### **Domestic violence as a manifestation of patriarchy**

For example in a massive study of domestic violence by Dobash and Dobash (1979) they note that of the 3,020 arrest reports in a police district of Glasgow, 26.2% of those were assaults by men on their wives. They saw that violence in the family was bound up with day to day events, with the husband's jealousy of the wife, with differing expectations of her 'duties', and with the allocation of money. They perceived violence as ranging from pushing, shoving, slapping, kicking, choking to smothering. They observed that each incident used a variety of forms of violence. They noted that the home was a dangerous place for women and children, but that it was markedly less dangerous for men. They

refuse to accept that violence for men is a deviant act, since men, they observe, are taught directly and indirectly that violence is an appropriate means of problem solving, of demonstrating authority, especially against women. When interviewing these men, they found that quite typically they had a self-righteous air about their actions. In their eyes they had behaved quite correctly, they were "blase" and showed little or no remorse. They comment:

Men who use violence consider it their right and privilege as men and as head of the household to make claims of their wives; if their demands are not met, as in the case of timing of meals or of responding to sexual advances, the women may be punished.

(Ibid. p.104)

They noted men's consistent tendency to view women as objects of exploitation, and to see their own welfare as of primary and exclusive concern to others.

How did women respond to this? The Dobashes' comment that women seldom attempted to respond to violence with force, since they had found that resistance justified greater violence. Their main technique was to try and avoid the possibility of violence, by agreeing with the aggressors' view of the situation, by reasoning, or by refusing to argue. Despite these tactics, and given that withdrawal from the home was virtually impossible, 70% of such incidents ended in further attack.

Clearly for such women, the experience of being constrained in these ways, to avoid confrontation, to deny their own anger, to constantly experience their own powerlessness, to be forced into the role of victim by the threatened or actual use of violence, can only lead to a profound sense of being a non-person. The dehumanising way that such men treat women within the home can only create within the women a massive confusion as to who she is; if she is a person at all. It is a total experience of inauthenticity, created by men within the legitimated and structural exercise of power in the family.

**Dworkin's account of patriarchy: man's objectification of woman**

This concept of power, sexuality and its exploitation by men, is brilliantly discussed by Dworkin in her study of pornography (1984). Dworkin's analysis of the use of women by men is an account of the objectification of women by men. In reading her book however one becomes aware that in degrading women for their own purposes, their male sexual purposes, that men also succeed in degrading themselves. The activity of turning women into whores, thus not only dehumanises women, but in the process also dehumanises men. Men become brutalised, for they appear to have no consciousness of themselves as human, catering to themselves as if having the most perverted, anti-human needs. In reading Dworkin's horrific accounts of pornographic sexuality, one is reminded of Marx's criticism of man under capitalism, "in his

human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal" (Struik p.111).

It is this conceptualisation of human nature that informs my reading of Dworkin. That is to say, I do not hold to the view that man's nature is dictated by biology, but rather that the relations between women and men are constructed and informed largely by the social order. Yet what is the substance of male power? For Dworkin, as for Brownmiller, its expression is to be found in male sexuality, and the ways this is used to subordinate and control women. This is to be understood both symbolically, by depicting women graphically as whores, and in its actuality, for what pornography represents in the context of men possessing, that is owning women. In pornography, Dworkin sees, there is a representation of the objectification and the exploitation of women as commodities. In representing women in this way, the male is able to define his own identity, while the woman's own self is denied.

Dworkin comments:

the nature of the male self is that it takes, so that by definition, the absolute self is expressed in the absolute right to take what it needs to sustain itself.

(Ibid. p.13)

Her analysis confirms those feminist writings already discussed, that men's physical strength is used to control women, to terrorise, to create fear, to intimidate, to subdue, to make

submissive. Women within pornography become as commodities. How is this? Dworkin notes that the power of money in the hands of men becomes a power of owning and using women. Men have more money than women, but even where women have equal amounts, money is used in different ways, for it has different meanings for women and men.

Poor women, in general, use money for the basic survival of themselves and their children. Poor men, in general, use money to an astonishing degree for pleasure. Rich women use money especially for adornment so they will be desirable to men; money does not free them from the dicta of men. Rich men use money for pleasure and to make money.... money properly expresses masculinity. Money is primary in the acquisition of sex and sex is primary in the making of money... Wealth of any kind, to any degree, is an expression of male sexual power.

(Ibid. p.20)

Here Dworkin's analysis parallels Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism, the concern with, and domination of the commodity and money as an expression of alienation. Hence money in capitalism is the mediator between men and women, in the context of their sexual relations, and in the process of objectifying and of exploiting women, and of transforming them in pornography into commodities. Sexuality for men, as expressed in pornography, is a manifestation of their own fragmentation, their own objectification which when displaced on to women also fragments, exploits and objectifies her body and her sense of self. For men, within the context of pornography, sexuality becomes defined as an act of invasion, by what he can do with his penis. For just as the male psyche is invaded in the

objectifying processes of capitalism in his every day, so also does he invade women in pornography. Dworkin writes:

fucking is an act of possession - simultaneously an act of ownership, taking force; it is conquering; it expresses in intimacy power over and against, body to body, person to thing.

(Ibid. p.23)

Thus alienation, through the exploitation of capitalism, through the fragmentation of the work process, the division of labour, the appropriation of living labour and its consequent objectification, reproduces itself in the relationships between men and women, in their sexual political struggle, and it is this relationship which informs and reinforces the foundations for patriarchal capitalism.

#### **Marxism and feminism as a critique of everyday life**

In writing of the work of Marx and in selecting some commentaries by radical feminists, I have not attempted a synthesis. Clearly such a task would be impossible given that the focus is quite clearly different, Marx being primarily concerned with understanding the source of class conflict, while that of radical feminism, the experience of being objectified and exploited by men. However, their writing and that experience takes place under capitalism, just as Marx's development of his theory did. The fact that feminist writing occurred many decades later is irrelevant, for the organisation of work and the expropriation of labour via surplus value (Marx 1972) remains the same. The value



of the work of the early Marx lies in his philosophical explanations of how the organisation of work effects one's sense of being under capitalism.

Later writers of this century have been able to draw on this work and have shown how alienation, as Marx depicted it, informs male gender behaviour both at work and in the home. Meszaros pointed to the growing isolation between individuals, the preoccupation with privacy which informs the belief that freedom arises from freedom from the constraints of society. He argues that the family embodies ideologies of individualism, consumerism and autonomy.

Tolson observed that the experience of work feeds into the masculine identity, in that through work there is the opportunity to earn money, power and hence independence from the family. This experience is however class based, for he argues that the manual worker is powerless at work and therefore develops a number of masculine compensations. One way of achieving this is to express his sexuality in particular ways, though this is at the expense of women.

In contrast to this, the middle class male sees the family as an arena of stability and decency in an insecure world. Hence, within the middle class family, the necessity for conformity and order.

Leonard points to the effects of unemployment on the male. Set within the context of the importance of work to masculine identity, he points to the unemployed male as experiencing a sense of worthlessness and of a "turned-in anger" because of this.

Feminists also write of the everyday, but focus on how an internalisation of violence and domination by men, permeates their relationship with women. Brownmiller pointed to the widespread phenomenon of rape, and how all men benefit from this. Women have become subjugated and therefore dependent for men's protection because of this fear.

The Dobashes point to the everyday experience of violence in the family. Their study demonstrated the belief that men see the use of violence as a right and a privilege.

Lastly, I considered the work of Dworkin. Dworkin's work is particularly important for its evocation of the experience of objectification. Using the examples of pornography, she demonstrates how such material debases, degrades and exploits women. She sees a relationship between the greater access men have to money, and how they use that money, to transform women into commodities through the medium of pornography. Yet in doing this, she argues, man also humiliates and debases himself.

Hence the power and the significance of the early Marx and that of the work of radical feminists is that they share a particular

vision of the world. This particular view, this critique, points to the mystification of everyday life where people have become as objects, where social relations appear as things, and where as a consequence of this, experience is lived and is felt as fragmentation. Hence their work illuminates an understanding of the culture of the violence of the everyday. This culture of violence is imbued with a mystification, and is not therefore seen as such, but it can be seen to influence the care of children in the family. The next section elaborates on this further by examining the work of Laing and Esterson. The concept of mystification is a vital concept in their analysis of family life, since it indicates, at one level, why children fail to recognise their own exploitation or mistreatment.

#### **Demystifying the Family: Existentialism and Family Life**

Laing and Esterson's work is important because it is a detailed and clear account of inter-personal relations between parents and children within the schizophrenic family. Laing and Esterson refuse to label one member of such a family as schizophrenic, but rather see the relationships within particular families as contributing to a schizophrenic pattern of behaviour. In holding to this model they are rejecting the medical model of mental illness, i.e. seeing schizophrenia as a type of illness which is located in the individual. Their understanding is rather derived

from a close and detailed observation of family life, which draws on a particular philosophical view of the world.

Their work has the capacity, therefore, to get inside everyday family life. They demonstrate the inequalities, the injustices, the contradictions, the scapegoating, the confusions, and the denial of the validity of the other's point of view. In this they show how the schizophrenic family is an extreme form of every family's life. It is a depiction of emotional abuse, a form of child abuse which is particularly difficult to understand without the capacity or the willingness of the other to consider the phenomenology of experience.

In elaborating on this, the ways in which people may relate to each other, and in so doing violate the other's sense of being, Laing and Esterson develop the concept of mystification. They see it as the way in which parental power is used to mask the reality of the abusing relationship. They argue that this is represented in the belief that the parent loves the child and anything that they may do is therefore justified by this belief.

#### **Laing, Esterson and existential phenomenology**

Laing and Esterson's work draws on existentialism and phenomenology as a way of experiencing and interpreting the phenomena of interpersonal relationships within the family.

Phenomenology is a way of understanding phenomena as it appears to the subject, not necessarily as it is in the light of commonsense or scientific knowledge. For Laing therefore each individual's biography was specific to them, in the sense they invested their experience with an interpretation that could not be categorised into basic developmental stages. Existential phenomenology is therefore more of an approach than a theory, for it seeks to understand the mind of another as 'being-in-the-world'.

Craig describes existentialism as incorporating an atmosphere or a climate, and the language used to conceptualise this also denotes categories of experiencing oneself in the world, e.g. Existence, Being, Transcendence, Choice and Freedom, Authenticity, the Unique, Tension and Ambiguity, Possibility and Project (Craig 1976 p.1). Existentialism is therefore concerned with the totality of human existence, and opposes those philosophies or views of the world which perceive humanity as purely rational beings, seeing this perspective as an objectification of existence. It seeks therefore to integrate the totality of the personal with its contingent features, that is those experiences which are 'given' and cannot be altered, and locates these within the sphere of the micro-social.

It is concerned with both the concrete and with movement and change. The belief is that one cannot transcend oneself, that is go beyond oneself and exercise freedom, before an understanding of one's understanding of one's totality of existence. This

understanding develops from a consideration of as many different perspectives as possible and as meanings as possible, so each action must be described in as many different ways as possible before becoming subsumed under the 'project' or discarded. (Craib, 1976. p.91)

The concept of the project is fundamental in understanding Laing and Esterson's work, for it is pivotal within existentialism. The project defines its objects of study as in principle, understandable. That is, causes and motives can be understood, and these represent respectively, the object being in the world, and that within consciousness. The project is chosen in a context, it is selected from a field of possibilities presented by the world. It is free, but free in situation (Craib, 1976 p.30). In "The Divided Self" Laing states the purpose of the book is to make madness and the process of being mad comprehensible. He describes the experience of the patient with "clarity and distinctiveness" (Laing, 1973 p.18). He wants us to know, as he struggles to know, what it is to experience madness. To do this he enters into a relationship with the patient. The project is then an act of choice representing one's commitment and engagement by which one enters into it. By entering into it, the subject necessarily struggles with their understanding as a consequence of their praxis. One's self becomes part of that dialectic, between thought and act, between self and subject, between the specific and the general, between understanding and then changing. The

dialectic aims to keep every possible aspect of the concrete, but to integrate these into a totality in such a way that each is intelligible in terms of the others (Craib, 1976 p.115).

On this Laing writes, "We cannot help but see the person in one way or another and place our constructions or interpretations on his behaviour, as soon as we are in a relationship with him." (Laing 1973 p.31) And the opening up of one self to the other is shown by his comment, "that our view of the other depends on the willingness to enlist all the powers of every aspect of ourselves in the act of comprehension. It seems also that we require to orientate to this person in such a way as to leave open to us the possibility of understanding him" (Laing, 1973. p.32).

This approach to the understanding of the other, differs fundamentally from the deductive analytic theory which, in the process of reducing the totality of the elements of experience to that which is common, merely succeeds in reifying human existence. Since analytic theory strives to be logical, there must be no contradictions for contradictions cannot be common at all. Existential phenomenology however sees contradictions as essential to an understanding of the self.

Collier's study of Laing's work documents a number of contradictions which Laing saw as comprising the schizophrenic family. For example, those internal to the structure of a given

family, those requirements placed on some of its members but not others, and the family reality as opposed to the family phantasy. There are also contradictions between family requirements and 'instinctual' needs as for example sexuality, and those values which are held by the family, and those held by society (Collier 1977 p.122). These observations may be appreciated if we examine "Leaves of Spring" (Esterson 1970), a further and deeper study of the Danzig family, who first appeared in "Sanity, Madness and the Family" (Laing 1974).

At the beginning of this study, Esterson notes the contradiction between what Sarah's parents say to her and what they say about her. That that which was allowed expression to certain members of her family was not open to her, that they talked of her in her absence, that they gave her inaccurate information, "retrospective falsification", that although there was a shifting pattern of alliance between her parents and Sarah's brother, Sarah was never part of an alliance. That they saw her behaviour as a break in the 'front' of the family as they liked it to be presented in the world, that is as one of cooperation and harmony with a unity amongst them. To them Sarah was the problem.

Throughout these experiences of contradictions, Esterson notes the passive compliance of Sarah with her parents and her brother. He writes,

Required in phantasy by her parents to embody and control on their behalf their projected personal disorder, she was expected to live the ideals of respectability they did not.



She was to be the living public proof of their success and solidity as a family.

(Esterson 1970 p.163)

Hence the family survived at the expense of Sarah. The family norms of respectability, control and conformity could only be maintained by projecting onto her, that which was not. In this process, Sarah's identity and sense of being was destroyed. The pattern of experience and being by which she would have come to recognise herself in the context of others, was and had become fragmented in response to the untenable positions the family had woven around her. She was mad because she had no certainty of self. Her family, in order to maintain their own inner life, regulated Sarah's in order that their's could be preserved. So Laing , following Sartre's conception of negation, recognised that the search for identity arises from denying the other's definition of the self, in relation to the other. This Sarah was not allowed to do within the context of the inter-personal relations of her family.

Craib writes of Sartre's concept of the negation in some detail. To say no, to negate, is to define oneself as not being the other. In saying no, consciousness demonstrates the capacity of humanity to dissassociate itself from any chain of causality, for it intervenes with a conscious intention between the cause and the effect. It intervenes with an act of understanding and thus transcends itself. It is denial and opposition, the subject intervening between the perception of the event and the choice of

subsequent action. So that the subject can exercise their freedom in negation, it is necessary to go beyond the consciousness of something, which Sartre sees as a prereflective consciousness to becoming conscious (Craib, 1976).

that conformation of a false self or a partial or peripheral aspect of the self at the expense of other aspects may be a form of disconfirmation and more significantly still, a means of inducing the development of that false self.

(Collier 1975 p.105)

The concept of self is thus developed within the act of negation, for by it, one comes to know oneself as not the other. The act of negation being inherently part of the dialectic in that the other, as perceiving and experiencing oneself has entered into a dialogue and thus forms a basis by which contradictions may be understood within the totality of the experience. If this negation is denied by the other, a false sense of self is constructed, life becomes inauthentic because one lives as an object for the purposes of the other, rather than oneself.

In using Sartre's concept of the self as constructed within the process of negating, Laing moves beyond a purely phenomenological position. Insofar as phenomenology is concerned in seeing the world, as if through the eyes of the other, then such a view remains at the level of description. The danger in such positions is that they may become self-validating. Laing however sought both to understand the other's view of the world, their being, and a transcendence of this by arriving at another understanding.

## Existential phenomenology as philosophical praxis

Existential phenomenology as philosophical praxis cannot be grasped without understanding Laing's notion of ontological insecurity. Hence Laing writes that the individual may experience his own being as real, alive and whole, as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that identity and autonomy are never in question, as a continuum in time, as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth, as spatially co-extensive with the body. This is ontological security.

Or he may feel more unreal than real, more dead than alive, precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question.... He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good and valuable. He may feel partially divorced from his own body. In relating to others, he is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself, and the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat.

(Laing in Ruitenbeek 1962 p.44)

Such ontological insecurity is characterised by three forms of anxiety: that of engulfment, that of implosion and that of petrification. These are to be seen as states of being which are permeated with a devastating anxiety, which threatens to overwhelm one's existence.

In engulfment, a person dreads a relationship with others since it is associated with the fear of losing one's autonomy and identity. There is also a dread of being loved, of being understood and even

of being seen. Images are used of being buried, being drowned, being dragged into quicksand (Ibid p.46).

The experience of implosion leads to a similar dread of an impingement of reality. The person feels empty but fears any contact with reality as having a potential to persecute, to implode and to obliterate (Ibid p.49).

And petrification develops where a person has been treated as a thing, as an it, to the extent their subjectivity has drained away. Since they have been treated as if they have no feelings, they become depersonalised (Ibid p.50). (6)

Such anxieties may to a certain extent exist in all of us, but for the schizophrenic they are the essence of their being and inform their total orientation towards the world. In "The Divided Self" Laing considered the lack of ontological security in some detail, understanding it as a madness and as an individualised experience. He later in the same work pointed to his interest in exploring the genesis of the schizophrenic experience within the family, since the self develops within the context of the other's perception of oneself, and the consequences of that perception of perception. Laing writes of the "total family constellation" and the role of the family in contributing to the child's development of ontological security.

In "Sanity, Madness and the Family", Laing together with Esterson, observed and described eleven families, each of whom had a member defined as schizophrenic (Laing and Esterson 1974). They wished to understand and to know the totality of the individual's experience in the family, and they began by critically reviewing the contradictory writings as to the aetiology of schizophrenia. Since there was no objective or clinical diagnosis as to what it was, they began by grounding their research into a phenomenological approach. That is to say, they sought an understanding of the schizophrenic experience within a person's relationship with themselves, and to each other, and within the family nexus as they lived these out in the process of their interaction.

This phenomenological approach to the totality of family life presented both methodological and conceptual difficulties. The difficulties arose from observing a pattern of communication which embodied different processes. They distinguished between two; and conceptualised these as "praxis and process". They write,

When what is going on in any group can be traced to what agents are doing, it is termed praxis. What goes on in a group may not be intended by anyone. No one may even know what is happening. But what happens in a group will be intelligible if one can retrace the steps from what is going on (process) to who is doing what (praxis).

(Laing and Esterson 1974 p.22)

Laing and Esterson thus interviewed schizophrenic families and noted their interaction. This interaction was described without any attributes of explanation relating to causality. They sought

to make the experience and the behaviour intelligible, as it appeared to the family members. In this case they had a different approach both to explanations based on cause, and those which wish to seek to include in the analysis, the concept of the unconscious.

Yet if classical psychoanalysis (or as Sartre called it, Empirical Psychoanalysis) struggles to understand behaviour as fundamentally motivated by the repression of instincts (or trauma) existential psychoanalysis takes as its point of departure not the id, but the emphasis and choice an individual makes in the process of being-in-the-world. Sartre explains it thus,

When an existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that because he has a cowardly heart or lung or brain; he's not like that because of his psychological make-up; but he's like that because he has made himself a coward by his acts.

(Sartre Undated p.34)

And in reaction to the subject's knowing i.e. apprehending all that is there, as a necessity before transforming it, he writes,

The fact that the ultimate term of this existential enquiry must be a choice, distinguishes even better the psychoanalysis for which we have outlined the method and principle features. It therefore abandons the supposition that the environment acts mechanically on the subject under consideration. The environment can act on the subject only to the extent that he comprehends it, that is, transforms it with a situation.

(Ibid p.77)

Collier writes that Laing oscillates between two different notions; that held by the Freudians whereby the unconscious is represented as a mechanism of a mental process indicating the

repression of a painful experience, and one whereby the actor is simply unaware of his own experiences. He quotes Laing, "The unconscious is what we do not communicate, to ourselves or to one another," (In Collier p.45) and comments that this conception is close to Sartre's notion of self-deception. Nevertheless, Laing struggles with this confusion within the family, based on process and praxis, the intentional and the non-intentional and embodies within it the concept of mystification.

It is mystification which confuses reality with appearance, and which within these families may confuse one member to such an extent they fail to develop, or they lose their sense of self. They become ontologically insecure. Mystification is then, it would appear, a key concept in understanding how life is lived under capitalism. Psychoanalysts have written of repression as a mechanism by which we fail to know the origins of our own neurosis and suffering. Marx observed and developed the concept of commodity fetishism which arose out of man's alienation. And on a more prosaic note, in the opening chapter, I described how parents deny their abuse of the child. I saw this as rationalization. However the ways of understanding one's being in the world could be seen to be mystificatory, as I discuss in the following section in relation to child abuse.

## The mystification of family life

How can mystification be understood? Mystification is a process of confusion, whereby parental control and domination of the child is concealed by the appearance of a benevolent concern. Mystification has been identified by a number of writers, though they may not call it this. Schatzman writes that children experiencing mystification are not able to identify their persecutors or their methods of persecution, because the persecutor has persuaded or forced the victim to see such persecution as love. He comments that since the persecutor also believes in her explanations, it is made even more difficult to understand as persecution (Schatzman 1973 p.192). Others note the child's developing respect of authority, an authority that cannot be questioned, but to which the child is taught to submit (Cooper 1971 p.27).

Miller comments on the boundless tolerance of the child for their parents, the deeply internalised belief within the child that the parent loves them and the child's own lack of history which would enable them to distinguish between persecuting and loving behaviour. Child rearing, she writes, teaches the child not to know what is being done, the child learns not to see, not to understand and to overlook. The parent justifies persecuting behaviour by claiming to teach the child 'self control', to eradicate 'wilfulness, obstinancy and defiance' and to be obedient to the parent and to authority. Yet at the same time the parent's



own power is unquestioned, the parent's own right to rage and to humiliate is allowed free expression. She calls this the "War of Annihilation" against the self (Miller 1983).

And Bowlby writing in the aptly titled paper "On knowing what you are not supposed to know and the feeling that you are not supposed to feel" identifies the cost to the child for such behaviour. He notes that this involves protecting the parent from the child's own emotions, only at the cost of the child denying or repressing them. That this is possible because the parent manipulates the child by the use of a range of powerful and psychologically destructive tactics, as for example, threatening to abandon the child, to 'give them away' or to even kill themselves, because of the child's bad behaviour. Bowlby writes that since the child is not permitted to cry or to show anger, that they eventually come to believe that they did not see what they should have seen, and did not experience what they preferred them not to have experienced (Bowlby 1979).

Accounts of such mystification may also be found in literary works. In Butler's "The Way of All Flesh", an autobiographical account and an indictment of some forms of family life, the author observes,

the absence of a genial mental atmosphere is not commonly recognised by children who have known it. Young people have a marvellous facility of either denying or adapting themselves to circumstances. Even if they are unhappy - very unhappy - it is astonishing how easily they can be

prevented from finding it out, or at any rate from attributing it to any other cause than their own sinfulness.

(Butler 1973 p.57) (7)

Such writers have noted the repression and domination of children within the family and have seen the gap between the appearance of parental care and concern and its reality, the embodiment of a control and domination which represses the development of the child. That there is a mythology of family life, a mystification which since it is not recognised, is not understood, nor is it confronted.

It is this process of the repression of self that Laing and Esterson consider in their study of family lives as they observe the parent and child. It is important to understand that they attach no blame to the parent, since within existential - phenomenology, there is a striving to understand the meaning and importance to the parent of their actions. They do not therefore perceive them as behaving with a consciousness of malice and hatred. Rather their accounts demonstrate the parents 'pre-reflective consciousness' and alienation from themselves. It is an account based on the parents' own lack of authenticity, for they have no conception, no understanding as to themselves, who they are and the other in relation to them. They seek to keep the other as an object, to deny their negation and their freedom to act in the world. In Laing and Esterson's there are a number of examples of this.

They point to the experience of June a girl whose early years were spent in a plaster cast which almost totally restricted her mobility. Yet June's mother was unable to accept any other evaluation of this, other than that she attributed to her. June was, she said, "a lovely baby, a very happy child, boisterous and affectionate". Powerful psychological pressures were exerted in order that June should accept her mother's picture as if it was her own, and she was attacked if she dissented (Laing and Esterson 1974 p.149)

Jean had nightmares as a child, but as her mother also had nightmares, then Jean's could be no worse. Jean was told it was normal to have nightmares and not to like the dark, and since Jean never had the light on, then she really did not dislike the dark. Despite Jean talking of her nightmares, her mother stated she did not in fact have them (Ibid p.197) And Maya's parents behaved and spoke, as if they knew her better than herself. Laing and Esterson observed,

Not only did both her parents contradict Maya's memory, feelings, perceptions, motives, intentions, but they made attributions that were themselves self-contradictory, and, while they spoke and acted as they knew better than Maya what she remembered, what she wanted, what she felt, whether she was enjoying herself or whether she was tired, this control was often maintained in a way which was further mystifying.

(Ibid 1974 p.42)

Laing and Esterson give other examples of attempts by parents to deny, contain or control their daughter's sexuality. When Maya tried to share with her parents the thoughts she had of sex, she

was told that she did not have thoughts of that kind. When she masturbated, she was told she did not (Ibid p.42).

Lucy was told by her father that she was a prostitute and a slut, and she came to believe this, so she was unable to discriminate between ordinary friendliness and imminent rape. She trusted no one (Ibid p.64).

Sarah was told she could go out with boys, but as her parents watched her every move, she felt she had no privacy.

She thus became muddled over whether or not it was right to want to go out with boys, or even to have any private life in the first place. Her father tried to investigate her boyfriends without her knowledge in various ways, and when she objected she was told she was ungrateful.

(Ibid p.123)

The control of girls extended beyond that of their sexuality. It was (as Laing and Esterson observe) at the moment of their assertion of their differentness from the parent, that the parent interpreted such efforts as badness and then, if they persisted, their madness.

In a quite different study, Belotti makes a similar observation (Belotti, 1975). She sees this act of repression occurring far earlier than is evident from Laing and Esterson's work, but her observations as to the mother's evaluation of a daughter's 'rebelliousness', reinforces that of Laing and Esterson. She also notes the different interpretation and evaluation given to the young boy's behaviour compared with that of the girl's. The

crucial period is at the stage when the child is no longer confined, and by her activity and curiosity demands a greater response from the mother. Belotti writes,

From this moment, open conflict breaks out. The mother begins to recognise the child as a threat to her authority, to her desires for order, control and discipline. Their relationship becomes a continual battle. But while the mother allows, or even inwardly wants her son to fight with her and get the better of her because it is in the 'natural order of things' (as it is for her to be defeated) she will not allow the girl to fight and will stamp out any of her pretensions to autonomy. She herself has been denied this autonomy and needs to take her revenge on someone, somehow.... It is at this point that pitiless, direct and thorough repression begins.

(Belotti 1975 p.56)

Belotti also notes the mother's approval of meekness and docility in their daughters, and states that such children came to resemble their mothers; they become pathologically dependent, and will continue to run to their mother as an adult with the slightest problem.

These observations may be compared with Laing and Esterson's as in the example of Maya. "Her parents appear to have consistently regarded with alarm all expressions of developing autonomy on Maya's part," and saw it as evidence of her badness or her madness. Since her "illness" as they put it, she had become more 'difficult' as she did not fit in as she had done (Ibid p.35). And similarly, Sarah's attempt to demystify, to discuss forbidden issues, to comment on their attempt to keep secrets from her, to confuse her, was also due to her "illness." Ruby similarly was made to feel both mad and bad for even thinking that her uncle (in

fact her father) did not love her (Ibid p.135). June was told by her mother she looked hideous when wearing ordinary make-up, she ridiculed her daughter's expectancy that any boy was interested in her, whereas any expressions of irritation or exasperation on June's part, was a symptom of "illness" or "evil" (Ibid p.138).

What is the consequence of these continuous mystifications? As we have seen from Laing and Esterson's studies, the women here came to have a fragmented sense of reality, they had no sense of themselves as separate and autonomous people, for they had not been able to define for themselves who they were or what they wanted. These are extreme examples, though it is arguable that these particular family dynamics are especially in relation to female children, fairly typical, though extreme, manifestations of ordinary, every day accounts of family life. Girls who rebel and are consequently repressed in this way, would seem to travel through a three stage attribution, from good, (obedient) to bad (defiant) to mad (the destruction of the self).

The effect on the self of these continuous mystifications and attributions lead to the following state of mind:

Agnes was unsure what to think about herself (was she good or bad, well or ill?), about the hospital (was it a good or a bad place?), about her parents (were they ganged up against her or not, did they want her or not?). Mystifications were maintained over all these issues, and what her madness or badness consisted in, over the validity of her perception of hostile and sexual cues, and over how to evaluate her own sexuality and her parent's attitude towards it.

(Ibid p.258)

Laing and Esterson's study of schizophrenic families are crucial in furthering an understanding of family dynamics. Their work remains the only valid non-literary account of the phenomenology of the destructive interaction between family members. It is a powerful account of what could be called emotional abuse. It is a detailed account of the denial of another's autonomy. They point to the immense power of the parent and the way in which this underpins the process and the praxis of family life. They observed the confusion between these, and its interweaving within family dynamics. In so doing, the effect on the scapegoated member is to render them powerless. They are powerless in the sense they have no secure understanding as to who they are, what they think, whether they are right, whether they are bad or mad. They become what Laing calls "ontologically insecure".

Although their accounts do not blame the parent - indeed this would be contradictory from an existentialist viewpoint, since it would assume that the parent acted with a full understanding of their actions - one is aware of the critique. Laing writes in the preface, that our civilisation represses not only the 'instincts' but any form of transcendence, so that someone who cannot deny or forget, runs the risk of either being destroyed or of betraying what he knows (Laing 1973 p.11). It is therefore striking in the accounts of these women, that all were described as children as bright and happy, or a 'wonderful baby'. It seems it was at the point that the child began to test out their independence, to develop some sense of separateness from the parent, that the

control became intrusive and all pervasive. Parental power at this point strove to be hegemonic.

Similar evidence can be found within social work. In an article on juvenile justice, the author notes that girls who swear, refuse to help in the house, stay out late at night, who are rude, aggressive, 'wander about', are 'promiscuous' are likely to be brought before the court for consideration for a care order. Such girls are seen as bad. She noted that the mother is often the principal witness against her daughter, and that the girl has not only to face parental rejection but also a more punitive response from the courts. She comments that these same traits when found in boys are seen as normal, though not desirable. She writes,

There is now a considerable volume of research evidence that shows that female criminals are - because of their double offence against legality and against femininity - punished more harshly for their transgressions than males are.

(Hudson 1985 p.15)

It would seem that parents do have a more overtly repressive response to their daughters compared with sons. (8) From the parents viewpoint, such control is fully justified. Maya's mother remarks what happens to her is for her own good, Claire's parents that they did everything for the best, and Ruth's parents justified her 'being put away' because she was ill, that is, she abused and resented her parents.

Such explanations effectively conceal the abuse of the child surrounding it with an air of benevolence. The actual purpose of



parental power is to force into the child obedience and a respect for order, and to eliminate wilfulness, defiance and obstinacy. Such ways of being in the world have implications for society, in particular for the social order. The strength of Laing and Esterson's analysis lies in its critical contribution to understanding how control and domination is experienced at the ~~most~~ personal level. By control I mean not in the sense of protection, or of care and to prevent harm, but control which acts to obstruct, to limit and to destroy the struggle to develop self. It is here that exploitation within an unequal relationship, may be seen as a reflection at a micro-level of the structural inequalities of capitalism. Furthermore it is here, within the family, that the mystifications of the social order are first presented to the child.

Commentators on Laing have not been unaware of this relationship. For example, in Collier's account of Laing's work he discusses these issues as they are presented within his studies. Collier works from a Laingian premise of philosophical praxis and asks whether a struggle against repression within the family is also able to liberate individuals from an ideological mystification, and therefore ultimately contribute to the wider political struggle. He emphasises the value of the Laingian account in this way,

Such fundamental areas of ideology as those concerning the family, sexuality, authority and obedience, and morality, cannot even begin to be understood without an account of the effects of the experience of the family on the unconscious

of each individual - and that is a question for psychoanalysis not for Marxism.

(Collier 1977 p.171)

He asks what can be done to create a freer form of organisation, so that the problems that the psychoanalyst has to deal with, do not arise? He sees that liberation can only occur when the mass of people experience their oppression as intolerable, but that it is clear from the studies of such writers as Laing, that within the family there is a shared and unexamined belief in the need for order and obedience. Inculcating such beliefs in passivity, obedience, respect for a parent at whatever cost, unquestioning acceptance for their view of the world, not only has implications for one's own identity, but also contributes ultimately to the maintenance of the present social order.

One aspect of Laing and Esterson's work is inadequate however and that is the lack of discussion given to differences arising out of gender. It is clear from their work that parents have different expectations of girls, and they are able to show the way in which these expectations may destroy a girl's identity to the point of madness. But they do not comment why, that is to say, they do not set their account in any wider social construct. It cannot be argued because of this, as some do, that Laing's work is anti-mother or is sexist. For this issue is simply not addressed, their focus being on generational inequality rather than gender inequality, and in this, as their case studies show, they include a commentary on the role of the father. However this does raise

questions as to why and how gender behaviour is so enforced, and why the dichotomy between the girl's behaviour in relation to the parents, in comparison to the boy's behaviour should be so rigidly enforced. Secondly their work indicates that such repressive behaviour is not the property of a particular class, for madness occurs in both working and the middle classes. This suggests that the values of conformity and passivity may be common to both, and that to confront these attributes by a challenge to parental power is to run the risk of the badness or madnes definitions.

Given then the ways that emotional abuse is mystified, in that persecution is concealed by a range of behaviour and tactics that conceal the truth, what happens to those who do not oppose this domination and confusion?

One may hypothesise they conform and since this conformity is in line with both family norms of what should be said, done or thought and societal values, they are perceived as 'normal'. They are normal since, having internalised a belief in obedience and a respect for authority they become readily integrated into society. But there may be a cost - not only to themselves but also to others. For example Miller writes,

If treatment (i.e. controlling the child by mystification) of this sort is carried through consistently enough and early enough, then all the requirements will have been met to enable a citizen to live in a dictatorship without minding it.

(Miller 1983 p.400) (9)

And Horkheimer who sought an explanation for the rise and the support of Nazism, saw authoritarianism in the family and wrote,

Respect for law and order in the state appears to be inseparably tied to respect of children for their elders. Emotions, attitudes, and beliefs rooted in the family account for the coherence of our system of culture. They form an element of social cement.

(Horkheimer 1959 p.384)

Im holding to this view he was supported by the massive empirical evidence of the survey into authoritarian attitudes, undertaken in the United States in the 40s, where it was found that respect for law and order is nurtured in the family. This takes the form of respect for the power of authority and a consequent acceptance of submissiveness (Adorno 1950). The dangers in this form of behaviour lie in the lack of any articulated critique: respect for what, submission to whom?

### **Summary and Discussion**

At the beginning of this chapter I posed the question of whether a study of family relationships could inform an understanding of the nature of child abuse. In order to attempt to answer this question I have explored from the viewpoint of various critical perspectives how parental behaviour contributes to, or is informed by, the social order, and how this behaviour is manifested within family life.

I have argued that the family as constituted within capitalism, is a micro-cosm of the larger social order. That within it, are constructed notions of gender and of generation, as manifested by ideas of subordination to parental authority. An understanding of these processes are essential in developing alternative explanations of child abuse. By using these different perspectives, the focus has successively shifted around, so that there is an appreciation of the totality of experience within the life of the family. Underlying this approach has been an acceptance that the nature of capitalism delineates and constructs the quality of life for individuals within the family.

Living within capitalism and within a patriarchy, influence one's perception of the social world and one's relationship to others. Relationships do not occur in a vacuum, neither are they derived from instincts or drives, or from some abstracted notion of human nature. Rather they are confirmed by lived experience within the material world, as mediated by consciousness. Marx spoke of the "individual communal being", and in this is expressed the notion of the individual as being understandable only from the perspective of living within a particular society.

An alternative conceptualisation of the family is thus presented, one which differs from either empiricist accounts or ones using a systems approach. The family can be understood as a manifestation of the social, personal and material world in which it is situated and which it is a part of. The family is a psychic institution,

which embodies within it and between its members, hierarchical inequalities of gender and generation. It is these two categories, gender and generation which mediate the ideas, the experience and the values of a class society.

Psychoanalytic theory examined the consequences of repression, and pointed to the intensity of parental-child relationships which created strong feelings of identification with same sex parent. It is these early, exclusive relationships within the family, which construct a rigid gender identification, and a consequential sense of loss associated with the deprivation of care and attention.

The woman who accepts her husband, but denies her daughter, enables the gender division of labour to continue, while simultaneously creating the potential for her daughter to look always to men for support. Hence an emotional dependence prepares women for an economic dependence and this economic dependence reinforces and/or constructs an emotional dependence. Yet the male within the family is also dependent. Within the family, the satisfaction of his material and emotional needs, enables him to survive as a worker or as someone expected to work. So family relationships construct and reinforce a sense of his masculinity. The less power he has outside the family as a worker, the more crude his masculinity and the more extreme his exercise of power and domination over the family.

Seen in this way, masculinity is a response to and a defence against exploitation, fear and powerlessness. While the male may be powerless at work, he still can exercise power within the family. He still holds 'the definition of the situation'. The woman is however both powerless in the family and at work. A rigid gender division therefore constructs both the male and female experience.

The writings of Marx and feminists enabled us to consider the every day world outside the family as it influences male and female relationships. Marx's early writings demonstrated the effects on the individual, the reification of relationships which were derived from the capitalist work process with its emphasis on materialist values. Marx's discussion on alienation pointed to the dehumanising of the individual under capitalism.

By considering the work of the early Marx, who considered the nature of "the collective individual" as located within capitalism, we were able to consider the effects of these external work processes on the individual. Marx was able to both analyse and to understand the dialectic between the objective, material patterns of work and the process of the appropriation of the product by the class of the bourgeoisie, and the consequent effects on the individual.

Though clearly capitalism's formation differs today, in the last analysis it is still based on appropriation. Power still rests in

the hands of those who own wealth, and the mass of the population are subjected to the decisions of this wealth owning class. It is true the exercise of this power is more sophisticated and is less apparent since capitalism has provided a certain standard of living which merely acts to mystify and to conceal the true nature of the appropriating class.

Meszaros, drawing on Marx's thinking, argued that the twentieth-century response to this alienation was a retreat into the privacy of the family. This retreat was expressed by the ideology of individualism and a belief in autonomy. This has come to be understood as the 'human condition'. The human condition is thus represented on the one hand in cultural forms as the isolated individual, and on the other, as the expressed hostility towards any intervention which is invariably denounced as arbitrary and intrusive. Subjectively it is experienced as a split, the split between the individual and society, between the collective individual.

Feminists argued that both within and outside the family, it is women who are objectified by the (displaced) anger of men, and it is they who are fragmented and *psychically* split by men. Yet the family legitimates this process by the defense of its own autonomy and privacy, and the wider social order legitimates it by its overall reluctance to intervene. To intervene is to interfere, there is no conception of, no understanding of, any difference in



these actions. The autonomy of the family must be preserved, seemingly at any cost.

So in struggling to understand child abuse, the totality of the nexus of personal relationships has been considered. Child abuse is not an isolated, momentary event, but is part of the fabric of interpersonal relations as life is lived under capitalism. Hence this chapter has been a contribution to understanding the total picture, the 'gestalt' of inter-personal life.

The analysis has then de-individualised present explanations, and de-pathologised those personal explanations which focus on the separate, individualised expressions of parental anger. It has located the subjective experience of, and expression of anger within society within capitalism itself, and recognised the dialectic between personal pain and political and economic exploitation.

Clearly such a view of child abuse is derived from a critical approach to family life as it embodies gender and generational inequalities. It is this view which informs my understanding of child abuse, but before exploring this perspective further, I intend to critically review present writing on child abuse. I examine the preoccupation with definitions, which are seen as ways of knowing and therefore working with abuse; I discuss three models of explanation; and finally review three accounts of state intervention in the family. As will be seen, much of this perspective adopts a quite different stance to child abuse than the one advocated here.

#### CHAPTER 4 - NOTES

1. I have given here the Freudian notion of transference. There are variations from this. See "The Politics of Psychoanalysis", Stephen Frash (1987) for a full discussion.
2. See Sigmund Freud, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life", especially the chapter 'Slips of the Tongue' where Freud gives numerous examples to illustrate this thesis.
3. Marx's dialectical analysis of the relationship between men and nature, that is, human nature, would seem to me to reveal the inadequacies of both the Freudian and Kleinian accounts. For Freud, human nature comprises the powerful and subconscious forces of the instinctual and sexual life; for Klein, the forces of a primitive aggression which she said could be observed in the very young infant. The consequences of such interpretations are that they are used to justify the forces of control and repression, for the sake of civilisation.
4. This term has been much misunderstood. It does not depend on any abstract, idealised version of human nature, since as I have already indicated, Marx's use of this was a dialectical appreciation between being human and nature. It has to be seen within the context of man's capacity to perceive of himself as human, and to have a consciousness of himself separate from and in relationship to others.
5. The 'Domestic Labour' debate occupied the pages of the various international left journals in the early to mid 70s. It was of somewhat esoteric interest, since controversy raged over rather fine interpretations of Marxist economic theory. The British contributions are to be found in New Left Review No. 83 (1973), Wally Secombe, "The Housewife and her Labour under Capital", and a reply, New Left Review No. 89 (1975), Jean Gardiner, "Women's Domestic Labour".
6. These concepts are fully discussed in Laing's "The Divided Self", Pelican 1965.
7. This nineteenth-century literary account of family life in a repressive religious household is reputed to be partially autobiographical. It is a mordant critique of family relationships.
8. These observations of the greater repression of girls can be confirmed statistically. Between 1977 and 1982, the percentage of girls who were physically injured (66.9%) was more than twice that of boys (33.1%) (Creighton 1984, NSPCC). And in the recently published DHSS survey of children on the Child Protection Register, after the age of 5

years girls were consistently more likely to be in need of protection from abuse than boys. After the age of 16 years, the numbers of girls on the Register was three times that of boys (DHSS 1988).

9. Alice Miller's "For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in child rearing and the roots of violence" (1983) is an extended critique of the ways in which this rationalisation is used to justify the abuse of the child.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHILD CARE AND CHILD ABUSE: A CRITIQUE OF CURRENT THEORY AND PRACTICE

This chapter reviews current theory and practice in working with child abuse. Rather than describing, comparing, and then discussing different accounts of child abuse, it is organised around themes which are congruent to the research problematic: the nature of abuse and its prevalence in family life. It is intended to illustrate differences in understanding child abuse compared with the perspective I argue for here, from within critical theory. This discussion, then, seeks to reveal the different assumptions and understandings that lie behind the explanations.

I begin with a discussion of definitions of child abuse, arguing that although such definitions are primarily intended as a guide to action, they present serious problems in practice. To illustrate my argument I draw on case material from my own experience as a social worker.

Secondly I consider present explanations as to why parents abuse their children, but organise this in relation to how such explanations allow for notions of individual responsibility and the distribution of power within the family. I discuss three broad approaches in explaining child abuse: the voluntarist, the determinist and the welfare model.

Thirdly I consider the role of the social worker and the legitimisation of their power to intervene in the family, in order to protect the child. Hence I evaluate what notions of social work, the family and the state are being proffered and how these can be understood politically.

The chapter concludes with an elaboration of the consequent difficulties between viewing child abuse in the way discussed here, and that proffered within this thesis, via critical theory. I argue that much writing on child abuse is primarily derived from a concern with its management, and therefore focuses on aspects of working with child abuse. But it can be seen another way, in relationship to the social order. In the conclusion, therefore, I cite research which notes that violence towards children is legitimated, that family violence is common, and thirdly that there is a relationship between child abuse and spouse abuse.

## The Problem with Definitions

In Morgan's discussion of the politics and theory of the family, he makes the observation that definitions should be topics of, rather than resources of, enquiry. Hence he argues that definitions should appear at the end of an enquiry rather than at the beginning (Morgan 1985 p.269). This is because, as Morgan points out, definitions are "ideological constructs" and therefore map out the parameters of attention and define in a particular way how the topic should be approached. Many definitions of child abuse confirm this observation, for they depict, as I shall argue, a particular perception of child abuse.

Definitions of child abuse abound in the social work press. They are portrayed as an aid in diagnosing or assessing child abuse, the premise being that an adequate definition would enable social workers to assess whether or not child abuse has occurred or is occurring. This belief, it seems to me, is quite erroneous, but more importantly it is misleading for while one's attention is focussed on discussing the adequacy of a "working definition", other more important issues are avoided.

Definitions by their nature reify human activity, that is the definition turns on an event, it turns a relationship into a thing. There is an assumption of a consensus of opinion that what one is observing is merely a matter of recognising a fact, and that once one recognises this thing, the child abuse, then one is

free to take whatever action is deemed appropriate. This is clearly misleading for if abuse was simply a case of recognition, there would necessarily be a consensus of opinion as to what was child abuse. This is patently not the case.

Recognising the problem of defining abuse, Strauss et al. in considering physical abuse, distinguished between "normal violence" i.e. an intention to cause physical pain and harm, and "abusive violence", i.e. an act which has a potential to injure. They argue this distinction can take into account the general acceptance of physical punishment within the family (Strauss et al. 1981 p. 21). But really such distinctions gloss over the abuser who also has an intention to injure and therefore absolves him or her from responsibility for that act. The danger in perceiving it in this way is that abuse becomes "normal" since it all depends upon the degree of abuse and the expressed intention.

No matter how adequate the definition, in the sense that the author believes that it covers all eventualities, there still remains the problem of the relationship between the definition and the real "event "; the abuse of the child. It is between these stages and within these stages of interpretation and negotiation that the problem lies, that is within the construction of the definition, its application and its interpretation by the welfare worker. For example if we consider the following definitions:

Physical abuse of children is intentional, non-accidental use of physical force, or intentional, non-accidental acts of omission, on the part of the parent or other caretaker in

interaction with a child in his care, aimed at hurting, injuring or destroying that child.

(Gil 1971 p.638)

Sexual abuse is defined as involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, are unable to give informed consent and that violate the social taboos of family roles.

(Schechte in Mrazek and Kemp. 1981)

It can be seen that even if one takes them on their own terms, that is a guide to empirical action, a number of problems are immediately apparent. The first definition does not specify either how often an injury must occur before it can be classed as physical abuse, nor does it give any guide to action as to how severe an action must be before one defines it as physical abuse. The problems in applying such definitions become clear if we consider some examples from my own experience as a social worker. How would one evaluate an injury which arose from a father beating his son with a belt, so that the skin broke in two places? The father says it has never happened before, and the 10 year old boy agrees with his father. Furthermore the father argues vehemently that the boy deserved it, since he persisted in coming in late and refused to do his homework. The father says it was not his primary aim to hurt his child, but rather to "teach him a lesson". He states his son could do well at school, and he wants his child "to get on" and to make the most of his opportunities.

According to Gil's definition this would be classified as physical abuse, but as a guide to action it fails, since the father denies



that it was his intention to hurt him. Furthermore he says that it has only happened once.

And how does one define the following situation, whereby a playgroup leader reports that a 4 year old girl has come to a nursery with a fourth black eye in six weeks. At the nursery there is no indication that the child is unsteady on her feet, and the child herself has said that her mother hit her and made her have the black eye.

The mother denies any knowledge of the injuries at all, except on one occasion when she says the child fell off her bed. The childminder says the child has come to her with at least two black eyes, and she also says that the child has missed coming on some occasions though she does not know why. The mother's response to the social worker is to become increasingly aggressive, and she removes the child from the nursery quite suddenly saying she resents social worker and nursery interference.

Again Gil's definition is inadequate here, for there is no guide for the social worker in her assessment as to whether the injuries were caused accidentally or intentionally.

There are also problems in operating what is 'intentional, non-accidental acts of omission' as again the following case illustrates. (1)

A single parent not in paid employment, with two boys aged four and two years, persistently fails to care for the older child, having little concern for his physical and emotional development, or his safety. He is often seen by neighbours playing in a rubbish dump, where he has been burnt on one occasion, and he also plays on a bridge across a busy dual carriageway.

The social worker speaks to the mother at length, pointing out that this cannot be regarded as adequate care for a four year old. The mother replies that she has no control over her son, that he does what he likes and she threatens to tie him to the bed, to prevent him running away.

The social worker subsequently receives confirmation that this is indeed what the mother does, but is unable to work with the mother in any meaningful way, since she has defined care for her son as doing what the social worker has asked, to contain her son and prevent him from coming to harm. At the subsequent care hearing, following the failure of both case work and material help, the court does not recognise the child to be at risk, since the mother argues convincingly that whatever happens to the child is beyond her control. Thus the court was not convinced her omission of care intended to hurt the child. She was therefore denied any responsibility for caring for the child. The child meanwhile continued to be at risk. Hence in practice, it seems 'non-intentional' assault or neglect of children is less likely to

be regarded as abuse. This excludes all but the most sadistic of parents.

The British Association of Social Workers has recognised some of the problems with definitions but still believe that definitions have some part to play in working with abuse, even if they see the potential usefulness merely in terms of the registration of children on the Child Abuse Register. They write,

The absence of a working definition can lead to inappropriate intervention, infringement of family members' rights and gross inconsistencies in both the interpretation of risk and the registration of the children on the Child Abuse Register.

(BASW 1985 p.3)

They regard a working definition as,

A child is considered to be abused or at risk of abuse by parents when the basic needs of the children are not being met through avoidable acts of either commission or omission.

(Ibid. p.4)

Hence intention is replaced with avoidable. But what are the basic needs of children? BASW sees these as the need for physical care and protection from preventable harm, the need for love and security, and the opportunity to relate to others, the need for new experiences and help in relating to the environment, and the need for intellectual development.

Put in this way, no reasonable person would dispute them, though they may point out some difficulties in achieving them for parents who are under great stress for whatever reason, or are materially disadvantaged. BASW thus believes that the majority of parents

can supply these basic needs, the majority can supply "good enough parenting".

The problem with such a view is, however, that some abusive behaviour cannot be defined or avoided in the way that the BASW discussion suggests. For example, in the previous chapter I discussed how parents may emotionally abuse their children, but that this was unlikely to be recognised because of its being "mystified". Even allowing that this was recognised, it cannot simply be avoided.

Laing and Esterson's work showed how the enmeshment of family life and the transactions between family members were both process and praxis. Such behaviour could not be seen as failing to act to protect the child or even deliberately seeking to harm the child. Similarly, a causal link cannot be established between emotional abuse and harm, because harm may only be appreciated by entering into the phenomenology of the child's world. Harm here, does not show. There are no physical signs.

BASW's definition is therefore more appropriate for the detection of physical abuse and some forms of sexual abuse which result in physical injury to the child. It offers no help in recognising emotional abuse, in non-organic failure to thrive, or the emotional harm which takes place as a result of certain forms of sexual abuse, e.g. mutual masturbation between parent and child,

voyeurism or insisting that children observe adult sexual activities.

So far I have discussed the problem of definition in the context of its ability to be 'operationalized', that is as an aid for the social worker in her preliminary assessment. I have argued and illustrated my discussion with some examples, indicating that such definitions in practice are of limited value. I would now like to extend this and to consider the problems that continue to arise for the social worker in her assessment or in her search as to whether to identify the situation as abuse.

In the examples so far considered, the father who struck the son with the strap, the child with the unexplained black eye, the small boy left to his own devices, the parental explanation was crucial in the assessment stage. Yet what also entered into the assessment was the attitude of the parent to social worker questioning. The father was self-righteous and felt justified in beating his son. The mother was aggressive in her denials of assaulting her daughter and accused the social worker of unjustifiable intrusion into her role as a parent, and the mother who showed little concern for her four year old child, demonstrated by her response that her main concern was not to care for her son, but rather to take revenge on the social worker.

What is the social worker to make of these responses? What is a reasonable response and how would one expect to react to such

questioning? Should the social worker hold in mind the parents' 'rights', that the child is a member of a family and that the parent should feel free to raise the child in whatever way they chose, even if the social worker feels uneasy with these values, or should she hold in mind a sense of the child's needs, even the minimal and uncontroversial ones advocated by BASW?

In considering these issues it is worth bearing in mind some research on parental response to being questioned about the possibility of abuse. In an extensive study of the management of child abuse within three Social Services Departments over a period of five years, the researchers noted that the parental response was typically justificatory, that is that they did not accept that they had done anything morally reprehensible. Parents generally would deny injury, would argue that the child deserved the punishment, would blame homelessness or unemployment, saying it was material factors that caused them to injure or to reject their children. They would appeal to alternative philosophies or to adverse circumstances (Dingwall et al. 1981 p.22).

Such rationalisations are also held by society at large. In Alice Miller's extensive critique of the ambivalent and hostile attitude of Western Europe towards children she noted the response of embarrassment, indignation, resentment, open rejection and anxiety. She became aware that to confront the power of the parent by questioning their care and control of the child was to tread on taboo territory. She was told that in her clinical

practice as a psychoanalyst, in her belief of her patients' accounts of their childhood, that she was misguided, that patients fantasised about their illtreatment, for they projected their own aggression and sexuality on to the parent. Yet her clinical practice showed her the reverse was true (Miller 1985 p.4), for it was only by accepting the patients' account and acting as their advocate, that her patients became better.

Gelles, an American sociologist who also conducted large scale investigations of violence within the family noted that "The most controversial aspect of our public presentation in the U.S. has been equating physical punishment of children with violence - we claim spankings are violent." (Gelles in Martin 1978). He comments that violence in childrearing is not only accepted, it is encouraged and mandated (2). Hence for the social worker to question the parent, beliefs in the autonomy of the family, in the rightness of the parental view, and in parental rights to deal with their children as they wish, become threatened. Why should this be so?

The previous theoretical section indicated how such behaviour might be interpreted. Hence, it would seem in such circumstances the privacy, the security and the apparent separateness of family life is suddenly shown as fragile and weak, and that the view of the family as a haven is questioned. But more important than this, the patriarchal power embedded in family life which is

represented (in the first instance) by male authority becomes undermined.

But there is another aspect to this parental response, which is quite separate from their perceptions of social work interventions; this is the non-recognition of violence as violence. We have already considered the rationalisations that parents may make and noted that underlying this, is a belief in the legitimacy of violence. But parents also abuse without evaluating their behaviour as abusive.

For example, Goodes' study of force and violence in the family found that most families found force to be acceptable and legitimate when used to achieve certain ends. He noted that the family trained children to both expect, accept and use violence and to see it as an unalterable state of affairs (Goode 1971).

Gelles' research also found that "individuals will accept and approve of an act in their own home which they would condemn if it happened to them in the streets or taverns." (Gelles in Martin 1978 p.175). And in an earlier piece of research, Gelles writes that "the act of a parent hitting a child is so pervasive that it is quite problematic to say that the parent is violent". (Gelles 1972)

Yet these beliefs, in the necessity of using punishment for the further training of children, are not universal. Korbin's cross-



cultural analysis of child rearing shows that what is acceptable in the West, such as isolating children in rooms on their own, or leaving children to cry, would be at odds with many cultures. She writes, "[P]arents in Western Nations tend to be low in infant indulgence, to initiate childtraining practices at an early stage, and to be harsher in their expectation of compliance from very young children." (Jill E. Korbin in Helfer and Kempe 1976 p.29)

These beliefs - beliefs in legitimation, in the privacy of the family, denial of abuse, non-recognition of abuse - thus create immense problems for the social worker in her assessment. The social worker has after all, been a member of a family and as such has, presumably, also internalised these values. Yet as a member of a statutory agency which seeks to control some of these practices within the family, she is expected to assess and evaluate child rearing patterns. The conflict for her is that neither society in terms of general social beliefs, nor the media, nor families legitimate the intervention which she has a statutory duty to perform, unless, it seems the child's life is in immediate danger. Is this conflict capable of resolution, and if so how? Again there is a belief that social workers are quick to intervene, that they intrude, and that social work action in child abuse is unwarrantable and unjustifiable, so that children are removed from their parents without reasonable cause.

Empirical research however demonstrates this belief as a mythology, for if anything, social workers take risks with

children. Giovanni<sup>on</sup> and Becerra noted that social workers would  
tend to avoid questioning the parents, or become enraged with the  
abusing parent, or deny the abuse especially when they had  
established a warm ongoing relationship with the parent (1979  
p.96). (3) Apart from this there is evidence that social workers  
have more tolerant attitudes towards the abuse of children than  
members of the community. The same researchers note:

[T]he data do not support suspicions that professional  
designation of parental acts as ones of mistreatment or as  
deviant are based on values unique to them and imposed on,  
not shared by the general populace. If anything, the  
absolute ratings of seriousness of the specific acts of  
mistreatment would indicate the potential for quite the  
opposite situation.

(Ibid. p.208)

Research in Britain confirms this thesis. In the DHSS' study of  
Inquiry reports undertaken by Local Authorities and Central  
Government during 1973-1981, they note:

[S]ocial workers, in particular, work with a population  
which is often beset with many problems and stresses and may  
take a less serious view of certain circumstances.

(Ibid. p.18)

Dingwall, Bekelaar and Murray also observed that social workers  
lowered their expectations, and that they operated according to a  
'rule of optimism'. (4) They found that social workers used two  
'institutional devices' which screened out the majority of  
potential cases of abuse and provided justification for non-  
intervention. These were beliefs in cultural relativity in  
childrearing; they were wary of defining child abuse that might be  
seen as 'labelling' or as judgemental. Secondly they noted the  
unquestioned belief that all parents love their children, that this

was 'natural', and the authors argue therefore that such views would necessarily influence one's interpretation of the 'evidence'.

The researchers commented:

Singly or together they provide, on the one hand, for a highly elastic approach to parental deviance and, on the other, for the charge of deviance to be a matter of such gravity that workers are understandably inhibited from making it. Cultural relativism has no internal limit to its theorizing. It is indefinitely extendable, so that any small group or articulate individual can find their own theories being evaluated to the status of a culture.

(Ibid. p.89) (6)

Thus even though we have not moved beyond the 'definition' of the situation stage, it is clear there are a number of factors which will influence the social worker in her assessment. These factors are not however random or a question of individual inclination. Empirical research has shown that there are regular patterns of intervening justifications and explanations which influence the social worker's interpretation and mitigate the possibility of defining the situation as abuse.

These regular patterns depend on ideological views as to the relationship between the parent and the child, and the legitimacy afforded to the parental view. There is a readiness to believe the parent's denial, or that the harm was unintentional, was justified or was unimportant, or that the child was lying or was fantasising. The social worker colludes with the parent's view, since the power of the adult world can define the situation as

abusive or not. For the social worker to deny the validity or the reality of the parental view, apart from the problematic of the interpretation of the evidence, the social worker must see herself as separate from the parent and identified with the child. Yet to make this transition, the social worker would need to have a theoretical understanding of the family and the position of the child, as discussed in the previous chapter. That is, she would need to have some conceptualisation of gender and generational inequality, the family's need for privacy and autonomy, and its mystification.

Yet it is at the stage of the Case Conference that the final confirmation is made as to whether or not abuse is occurring, for it is here that three occupational ideologies compete, that of the lawyer, the doctor, and the social worker. In effect these three views reflect different ideas about the nature of humanity and are therefore political for they incorporate as does the social worker, ideas about the family, and the relationship between the parent and child. It is the Case Conference which institutionally legitimates a definition of child abuse, for its purpose is to arrive at some conclusion as to whether the child has been or is being abused, to decide whether or not to put the child on the Child Abuse Register, and assuming these are both implemented, whether it is appropriate to instigate Care Proceedings. (5). At this early stage, the evidence of the doctor is crucial, for although the social worker has a picture of the family composed of

incidents, observations and feelings based on her relationship with the family, by themselves these are insufficient.

In Dingwall et al.'s ethnographic study of social work decision-making, they found that in the case of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, a doctor's opinion or a psychiatrist's opinion legitimates or denies the validity of the social worker's assessment, for their view is regarded as of more importance and more relevant than that of the social worker. It is seen as more 'scientific'. Yet in relation to the question of the discussion, in assessing whether the child has been abused, the doctor shares with the lawyer a dependence on 'facts' or hard evidence, on what can be seen. They do not interpret, they do not 'indulge' in speculation, they both see themselves as rational people, as merely imparting information about either a diagnosis, (the child's injury was caused by a stick) or the law (the evidence would not stand up in court) (Ibid 1981). What they fail to see is that they too are making complex moral and political statements, and their rather naive belief in the empirical nature of their occupations is, in its practice inherently conservative, for they do not see further than the most obvious. (6).

'Defining' child abuse is then deeply problematic. Definitions give little guide for interpretation or for other action, and neither do they help an understanding of child abuse. In practice, defining child abuse is a process of negotiation between the parents and the social worker, who has to consider for herself

in the light of her own beliefs the parent's explanation. Yet this is further subjected to the views of other professionals who have a different world view, the total process being an exercise in moral and political judgement.

### **The Problem with Explanations**

Explanations are, like definitions, views of the world. They are moral and political statements, and reflect the social and economic world we live in. Explanations of child abuse are theoretically poor, to consider them is to enter a market place of competing views of empirical nature. There are psychopathological explanations, psychiatric, environmental, stress, sociological and cycle of deprivation theories. Some researchers have taken all these theories and run them through a computer and concluded that child abuse is caused by a number of multi-variable factors which interact with each other. (Lystrad, 1975. Rutter, 1977.)

Such explanations do not have a knowledge of the nature of abuse. They are analytical explanations and one-sided, for there is no recognition of the politics of the interpretation. These accounts are ideological accounts for they do not confront the hierarchy of the adult-child world, nor do they confront the hierarchy of credibility within the family, the different validation afforded the parent's view and that of the child's. The child is not allowed to become a subject for her/himself, for they remain

objectified within the parameters of the explanation. The abuse is isolated, atomised, and becomes an event, and the event is seen as the product of particular circumstances which in relationship with each other at a particular moment, caused the abuse.

How is one to make sense of, and to give some order to such confusion? How can such a multitude of explanations be classified? Do they share any similarities and what are their differences? Do they give any account of levels of mediation between the individual and the social structure?

It seemed in considering these problems that a way of ordering the confusion was to consider their view of humanity, and to make explicit what was often implicit, that is the question of choice. I was interested to consider therefore how the notion of responsibility was treated in the discussion of abuse, and how the writer understood the notions of power within the family. In this way some order could be brought out of the chaos of competing and contradictory explanations, and the discussion could be grounded within a clear moral political framework. For the problem seemed to lie within this dynamic, that of interconnectedness of the individual within the larger social structure, and their individual consciousness within it.

As an existential problem, this has occupied philosophers for centuries and ideas on it inform much legal and sociological thinking, but for the writers on child abuse it remains a largely

unexplored area. It is not however my intention to enter into an elaborate discussion on this issue, for the aim is at this point only to consider the usefulness of these philosophical concepts as they inform an understanding of intention and action.

So in a discussion of "Images of Man and Social Control", Stoll categorises the two notions of man as agents in the social world according to whether they are free to make decisions and to act on them, the voluntarist notion, or whether they are subjected to external forces that prevent them from exercising choice, the determinists (Stoll 1968). Carter elaborates on this theoretical dichotomy by adding a third, that of the welfare model (Carter 1974). Clearly these are simplifications, but for the purposes of this discussion they are helpful constructs for they indicate some important differences in conceptualising and understanding behaviour.

#### The voluntarist model

The voluntarist notion informs much legal thinking. There is a recognition that society operates according to rules and a belief that these are for the good of society as a whole, for they must apply to everyone. There is no account taken of the relativity of beliefs for there is an assumption that these rules are universal within a particular social order, and there is a consensus as to what is right or wrong. The function of rules or laws is then to ensure that justice is upheld.(7) Underlying this view is a



belief that man is a free agent, that he or she is aware of the morality of their actions, that they have a notion of what is right or wrong and that they exercise choices according to that knowledge. Though there is a recognition that there may be mitigating factors such as poverty or stress, the view is upheld that individuals are still responsible for their actions; for in breaking rules or laws, they indicate their intentions, and they do so with a full knowledge what they do is wrong and an offence against society. There is thus the belief that rule breakers are fully informed both as to their choices, of themselves, and the consequences of their actions.

The voluntarist notion of humanity is enormously liberatory and yet simultaneously oppressive. It is liberatory in that it gives enormous powers to the individual to make decisions and to exercise a free choice as to how they live and behave. It assumes an absolute full consciousness, imbuing an individual with a total awareness of their own morality and of their own values in the context of society. It does not recognise a contradiction between what a person says he or she believes in, and how he or she may act. The act reveals the intention. It is oppressive in that in practice, the voluntarist notion plucks the individual out of the context of his/her life. In actuality it is a form of positivism since it cannot within the terms of its theory take account of the reality of both emotional pressures and environmental constraints. It fails to take account of the complexity of material factors, emotional aspects, and of

ideological forces which hinder an individual from achieving a deeper consciousness of themselves and therefore behaving 'freely'. Because of this and necessarily, the response of the voluntarists veers towards a punitiveness. For example, in a legal context, if an individual acted with intention of breaking the law, with no regard for the ideas of social justice, then he or she must be restrained, controlled, punished. For the lawyer, or for those with a legally trained mind, the response to the child abuser is clear. First one must establish whether an offence has been committed. One looks for the evidence, preferably visual evidence, one ascertains who was responsible for the injury and their intention and having established that, taking into account any mitigating factors, the appropriate punishment according to judgements in case law is apportioned.

The attraction of the voluntarist notion is its clarity; though as an explanation of human behaviour it is so simplified as to be crude, yet it does give a working response to the problems of abuse. The difficulty is that there is no attempt to understand the meaning to the actor concerned. Only the act is considered and it only becomes real, that is worthy of attention if a law has been broken. As a model for practice it is more suited to the court room, for once the evidence proves the charge, then a remedy is suggested to redress the wrong. Within this notion of human nature, there is no model of change other than the individual responding to the punishment, and others similarly being "deterred" because of the prospect of receiving similar sentences.

Having said all this, there are those working with abused children who do hold this perspective, as for example some feminists. I shall discuss their explanation of sexual abuse subsequently but here I would like to focus on their arguments which form the basis for demands for justice.

Firstly they point to evidence that demonstrates that sexually abusive men are resistant to therapeutic treatment, their acts are premeditated and that they persistently deny their guilt, whether of a moral or legal nature (Rush 1980 p.3). They note the tendency in such men to blame the victim (Forward and Buck 1981 p.28, Herman 1981 p.22, Nelson 1982), and they point to the contradictions within society that send men to prison for property offences, but appears to have a soft line on the sexual abuse of children within the family (Nelson 1982). They argue that the law must take an unequivocal stand on sexual abuse since incest is an abuse of male power and is analogous to rape (Aiers 1985). Finally feminists point to the crisis within the family at the moment of disclosure by the child. They observe that it is frequently the child that is removed from the family, as if she was the guilty partner, and they argue that the law must act to protect the female members of the family and remove the father. It is the man who should be arrested and charged since it is he who is possibly guilty of an offence (Herman 1981).

The attraction of such an approach lies in its clarity of view, its clear political statement in the recognition and opposition to male power, and its advocacy for sexually abused girls within the family. Yet as a model for change, its premise appears harsh. The implication is that man can only change or will change as a response to external punishment, and that reason or appeals to sentiment have no place in the struggle.

#### The determinist model

In contrast to this notion of the preeminence of freedom and choice, the determinists take little or no account of understanding by the actor, or of intention, meaning, freedom of choice. Humanity here appears as a victim of circumstances, his/her behaviour 'caused' by external events over which there is little or no control. Such a view of human nature is widely disseminated in considering child abuse.

Within this category we can include the medical model, which actually informs the whole thesis, the view that the abuser is sick or is mentally ill. The environmental thesis, that bad housing, poverty or unemployment 'causes' the abuse, the 'bonding' thesis, that somehow mothering is 'natural' and its lack can be detected within a few hours of birth and the 'cycle of deprivation' thesis, that parents abuse because they were abused.

I shall first consider the medical model. The medical model considers human beings as organisms, and human activity as behaviour which can be understood through careful observation (Weik 1983). When the organism (humanity) behaves in an apparently strange or deviant way, there is an assumption that something internal (hormonal, genetic or instinctual) has gone wrong, and that this must be corrected by the application of something external, either drugs or 'treatment' which will produce behaviour change. Hence there is an assumption that one can define this sick state of affairs, that it is possible to make a diagnosis by observing the symptoms, that is the behaviour.

Labels abound; child abusers are 'immature, impulse-ridden, dependent, sado-masochistic, narcissistic, egocentric and demanding' (B.F. Steele and C.B. Pollock in C.M. Lee 1978; Lystad 1975). Yet the fact that such characteristics are prevalent amongst people in general, does not appear to disturb the labellers unduly. It is also a view that is congruent with defining child abuse as a set of signs and symptoms, in that one does not seek to understand a relationship, but rather look for the thing, that of the signs of child abuse. For example, Cooper writes that 'squashed fingers may not be the innocent accident at first described', and that 'skin signs ' must be read, since bruises, lacerations, wheals, scars, burns and scalds are present in over 90% of abused children (Cooper in Carver, 1978).

If the child abuser is diagnosed as 'sick', then they must be 'treated', and generally speaking the behavioural approach is preferred since like a drug it can be externally prescribed in order to produce the desired change. Thus the aim is not for the subject to understand the sources of their behaviour and thereby learn to reflect and and change it for themselves, but rather for the expert, the behavioural therapist to observe the person has learnt a new form of behaviour and therefore responds in a different way. This response will be seen as replacing the maladaptive and deviant form (Carver and Reeves et al. in Carver 1978).

The 'definer' thus becomes a powerful agent of social control who states what is important and what is not. They become the expert in defining child abuse, and this is based on 'scientific' evidence, the observation of human behaviour. To define child abuse in this way, as a sickness or a mental 'illness' reassures, for what is disturbing can be isolated, just like an infectious disease. The few unfortunates, who happen to be sick, to have 'poor impulse control', which causes them to abuse, can be treated by learning a new form of behaviour, which is planned by the neutral expert, free of any ethical or moral judgements that may influence their observations and hence the treatment plan.

The medical model thus takes no account of meaning or of intention, nor does it allow the abusing parent any responsibility for either understanding their behaviour or for learning other

forms of being. In effect it dehumanises humanity, and it is in this way that the arguments of the environmentalists share a certain similarity. It is rare for the environmentalists to actually argue in a crude form, that material factors (seen as forms of deprivation) actually 'cause' child abuse in the sense it could not be any other, yet this remains a strong implication in their arguments.

For example, Parton (1985) points to the social context of the abuser, and to the inequality of social and economic factors which create frustration, repression and anger in the individual. He bases this thesis on the noted empirical evidence, the correlation between socially defined abuse and of poverty, yet he makes no attempt to explore the nature of this relationship, as to how the individual comes to perceive and to act in society and how they, for themselves, could begin to change it. Hence this work is a generalisation which glosses over the interpretation of data, he considers these as facts and in so doing falls into the error of positivism and avoids the problematics and of choice both for himself or of others.

Other writers have critically reviewed such obvious explanations, noting the complexity is interpreting empirical data, as for example Allan (in Martin 1978 p.58) who in reviewing the extensive literature on child abuse, concludes that results (as to causes) are not readily explained by any single group of factors. She writes that so many variables appear to be inextricably linked,

that to establish which ones are causally prior or independently related to abuse seems almost impossible.

Gelles (in Martin 1978 p.175) comments that statistics on child abuse reflect a reporting bias. The statistics show an inverse relationship between social class and physical abuse i.e. that it appears that physical abuse is correlated with the working class. But he points out that the statistics reflect observed physical abuse and that the working class has a higher level of observation and reportage when compared with the middle classes. He like Allan, states that explanations of stress as causing child abuse are not reflected statistically, and that the causes of family violence are 'multi-dimensional and multi-variate'. Strauss also comments that stress does not cause child abuse, since violence is only one possible response. He points to studies of gender differences in responses to stress, which show that women are more likely to become depressed (in Kempe and Helfer 1980 p.87).

This is also confirmed by another study by Justice and Calvert who matched twenty-three abusing couples with twenty-three non-abusing couples. Both groups experienced high stress but the abusing couples were more likely to use violence as an attempt to solve a problem. They concluded that stress may predispose a parent to abuse, but other predisposing factors must be present. The same study refers to an extensive study of literature between 1972-82, by Freidrich and Weller who concluded that stress is not a



necessary or sufficient cause for abuse. Many families experience high levels of stress but do not abuse (Justice and Calvert 1985).

However the most comprehensive study of the relationship between class, sex and punishment is that of Eron et al. (1963). In a sample of 206 girls and 245 boys, the researchers found there was no difference among classes in the differential use of psychological and physical punishment. They also found that punishment for aggression from parents towards children did not, as the behaviouralists would have us believe, lead to a decrease in aggression (the aversion theory), but led to an increase in aggression amongst children. Further, that the higher the father's occupation, the more aggressive children, especially boys, are at school. Strauss et al. confirm this finding. They found the more 'ventilation' of aggression, the more violence. Where there is little or no verbal aggression, there is little or no physical violence. The most verbally aggressive quarter of the couples have a violence rate of 56:100 couples (Strauss et al. 1981 p.169).

Eron's study also indicated there was a form of consensus as to what constituted legitimated punishment, in that there was a spread of chastisement across the social classes.

There is a similarity in the findings of Polansky et al. (1983) who surveyed a sample of 431 black, white, middle and working class, rural and urban people. The researchers were interested in

testing whether social workers, as has been argued, imposed the values of the white middle classes. While the researchers were aware that cultural relativity might affect attitudes and perception, nevertheless they found a consensual standard of minimal child care across the classes and including ethnic factors.

In Straus' national survey of physical violence in more than two thousand families they found people from all social groups abusing their children and/or spouses. But there was a relationship between income and violence; the lower the income the higher the acts of abuse, between occupation and violence; the blue collar workers were twice as likely as the white collar workers to be violent, and between unemployment and violence; the unemployed or part-time male worker was more violent than the full time worker. They found however the lower the education the less likely people were to be violent. Violence was most common amongst individuals with a high education (Straus et al. 1981 p.147).

Yet if we consider the incident rate of sexual abuse, it is clear from virtually all studies, that there is an agreement that it is a trans-class phenomenon (Ward 1984, Herman 1982, Nelson 1982).

What can we conclude from considering these empirical studies? Since there are such considerable differences in interpreting the data, and clear indications of a dissonance between parental evaluations of what constitutes child abuse and how others may

define it, it is extremely difficult to say with any certainty what the causes are. There is considerable confusion in focusing on so many possible variables and on their relationship with each other, but in addition such an approach tends to avoid questions of interpretation: of abuse, of statistics and of the model of childcare held both by the researcher and the society in which they are studying. These are taken-for-granted and operate as a domain assumption.

Similar arguments can be used against those advocating 'cycle of deprivation' theories, as for example, Helfer:

Repeatedly we have found the most common element in their lives to be the history of having been significantly deprived or neglected, with or without physical abuse, in their own earliest years. This one finding is more nearly universal in the population of parents who maltreat their babies than any other single factor such as socio-economic status, living conditions, race, religion, education, psychiatric state, cultural milieu, or family structure.

(In Helfer and Kempe 1976 p.13)

Rutter and Madge in considering the thesis of cycle of deprivation theories, point to the problem of defining deprivation which is for the purpose of empirical studies, necessary. They point to its different meanings, that it can mean maternal lack of love, deprivation of financial and material resources, psychosocial disadvantages or unfavourable conditions and circumstances. Though they agree there is an association between parents who abuse also having had adverse parenting in their own childhood, there is a lack of evidence as to how disadvantage persists over the generations (Rutter and Madge 1977 p.235).

In a further study, Madge writes that family history, on its own, is not a very good predictor of family difficulties, and that it may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition (Madge 1983 p.200). If therefore 'adverse parenting' is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, then it would seem important for some explanation as to why those who are abused, do not themselves abuse. Could it be that they have some understanding of their abuse, they understand that experience, have not denied themselves that knowledge and having reflected on this, choose to behave in another way?

The avoidance of a consideration of such issues can be seen in the theory of 'bonding'. Bonding is seen to be natural, part of a woman's instinct to nurture, part of nature, so where there is a lack of it, it is likely to be associated with or cause the abuse or the rejection of the child. It is said that the success or the failure of the bond can be observed immediately after the child's birth, for this is the critical period. The mother must be able to hold and to fondle the baby because it is at this point that the emotional tie will be made. Hence to separate a newly born child and its mother is potentially harmful, for the bond will be inadequate (Sluckin et al. 1983). The crucial point here is that mothering is seen to be 'natural', nurturing is elevated to some mystical point where it cannot be explained or understood, it is just there, part of being a woman it seems.

The dangers in holding such views are several. Firstly there is the assumption that one is born with the gift to mother, one does not learn to respond sensitively to another's needs, to have the experience of observing or caring for babies before one can do it. And since it is a specific quality known apparently only to women, then men need feel no responsibility to care for their children. After all there is no popularisation of the belief that men have an instinct to nurture, that they too must bond with the child. According to this theory, women must necessarily take the responsibility for child care for this is their 'natural' role, and it is to be expected that women will love and care for their children. Such beliefs are in fact ideologies for it is quite clear whether a mother abuses a child or not, that many women do not love or even like their children, or may perceive one child as unloveable or as the target of their spite and dislike.

This leads to certain pernicious social work beliefs as far as the child is concerned, for although the social worker may be acting with the best of intentions and good faith, she is unlikely to perceive the true state of affairs. Her unexamined premise will be therefore that mothers love their children as a matter of course, and even the most clear evidence of rejection and assault within the family will not be interpreted as such, but rather explained away or put down to any of the explanations we have so far considered.

Hence the mother who asks for her newly born child to be adopted, or the parent who asks for their child to be received into care, is treated as 'unnatural', and the social worker judges herself as successful, if she persuades the parent to keep to keep the child and to continue her caring. It goes without saying that whether the child would prefer to be with someone who wants to be with him or her, rather than staying with a reluctant parent, is not open to consideration. The parent meanwhile who has been subjected to a virtual cross-examination can only feel that their request which presumably rose out of desperation and an honest recognition that they were at the end of their tether, was ultimately wrong and that they were inadequate even to consider it.

In their study of the process of decision making in child abuse cases, Dingwall et al. observed that this belief in 'natural love', had a "special, enduring, timeless and culture free quality". They write,

If it is assumed that all parents love their children as a fact of nature, then it becomes very difficult to read evidence in a way that is inconsistent with this assumption. The challenge, as we have remarked, amounts to an allegation that deviant parents do not share a common humanity with the rest of us.

(Ibid 1983 p.87)

Thus for the social worker to base their practice on this belief, means not only is the child's interests not considered, but they will simultaneously label the parent who cannot care for the child as somehow inadequate or deviant.

Hence although these various explanations of child abuse seem on the surface to be different, there is, I have argued, an underlying similarity. The aim in such explanations is to establish a causal connection between one or more variables, but in order for this to be made meaningful, there needs to be a consideration of the nature of the association between variables, e.g. if we wanted to understand why there are more children on the abuse register from the lowest income groups, it could not be assumed that more poor parents abuse their children than the affluent, or that they were more protective of the children of the poor. All these are possibilities and would need exploring by looking at the meanings of child abuse within some explicit conceptualisation of what view of childcare is being held both by the researcher and any other actor under examination.

#### The welfare model

The welfare model is a compromise between an individual and a sociological explanation. Child abuse here is seen as perpetrated by an individual with a particular childhood history, in a particular family, situated in a particular environment, and in response to a certain situation. It attempts to include all the possible variables, except a critical analysis of the social order. It is therefore a depoliticised account, but suited for giving some indication of how to work with an immediate context.

Wolfe describes a variant of the welfare model, which he calls the "socio-interactionist explanation", thus:

The social interactional model attempts to bridge this gap by focusing on the interactional process between parent and child, within both the familial context and the larger social structure.... Drawn largely from clinical and developmental research on parent-child interactions, this viewpoint approaches the etiology and exacerbations of abuse in terms of the dynamic interplay between individual, family, and social factors, in relation to both past (e.g. exposure to abuse as a child) and present (e.g. a demanding child) events. The patient's learning history, interpersonal experiences, and intrinsic capabilities are regarded as predisposing characteristics presumed to be important contributions to an abusive episode or pattern.

(Wolfe 1987 p.49)

The problem with the welfare model as an explanation of human activity, is that it has little theory. Because it is poor in theory, the grounds for its understanding are constantly shifting. It is a model on which social workers base their practice, but since this practice embodies the contradictory expectations that politicians and society place on social workers, practice veers over the course of time from one expectation to another.

Social workers are trained to primarily focus on the needs of the individual. Yet this individual may be a member of the family, and the needs of that individual may be at odds with the values of the family which sustain it as an institution and as a system. Social workers have not traditionally been trained to examine the politics of this dilemma, yet society gives no guidelines either, for it is a contradiction which is part of the capitalist ethos.



The contradiction being that the family must be maintained but that in the process, its individual members must not suffer.

While these demands are made on the social worker there is simultaneously a call for better practice, more specialisation and more training. Social workers it is said, should be more professional, for the belief is that a more 'professional' approach would result in fewer child deaths.

Hence practice for the social worker means working in the confusion of these contradictory demands, in the context of politicisation, in the context of cost cutting, and above all in the context of a moral vacuum. While social workers can be blamed for the child's death, journalists, politicians, academics, neighbours, parents, the person in the street, can be excused any responsibility, any role.

Yet for the social workers this is a part of their everyday work. It is social workers who must in this moral and political vacuum, try and make sense of abuse and who must try and see behind the parental evasions, denials, avoidance of responsibility yet also take account of their economic circumstances, their housing situation, the demands of their occupation or their non-occupation, their child care practices. For somewhere behind these urgent aspects of adult need, there is a child who in comparison is powerless and is subjected to, without any other

advocacy, parental whims, caprices and abuse, and it is the child that the social worker has statutory responsibility for.

For the social worker then, the tension is between the individual who it is assumed, in theory at least has exercised a choice, but this particular choice can only be understood in a context. This context takes in not only the family but also the wider social order, though in any one case the social worker's evaluation will tend towards emphasising one rather than another. Since the social worker works on the assumption that the client has exercised a choice, this leads her to believe that the client could have chosen something other; she remains optimistic then that the client is capable of change. Her case work and group work skills are used in such a way as to encourage this.

In their study of social work decision making, the authors, Dingwall et al. observed this social work optimism, but they noticed that in practice it placed the child at risk. They wrote that the 'rule of optimism' along with the 'natural love' argument and that of 'cultural relativity', acted as powerful filtering devices and accounted for the minute number of care orders as compared with the actual child abuse referrals (Ibid 1983).

Yet fundamentally a social worker's relationship with, and her understanding of her client can be said to be phenomenological. This is both its strength and its weakness, for in order that the client can be understood, the social worker must to a certain

extent suspend her own values and belief system. She must learn to take the actor's view so that the client's emotional and cognitive life, their definition of the situation, can be located within, and weighed against the duties placed on her by the organisation in which she works. But informing her response is also an awareness of the confused demands that the wider social order makes of the social worker who works with the abusing family. Whereas the judgements and responses of society tend to define child abuse as a Social Service management problem, this for the social worker is an abstraction, for she also sees as part of her work the private and individual tragedy. The public issue has become a private trouble, and it is between this convergence of the individual and the social that she works.

Working with child abuse is for the social worker a most stressful area of work. The social worker becomes for the abusing parent a target for their anger, their denials, their hatred. The social worker must struggle with these feelings projected onto her to avoid labelling the parent as sick, but at the same time she struggles to avoid colluding with the parent in their denial of abuse. In this struggle she operates at different levels of meaning and at different levels of interpretations. What may appear obvious to the parent, what may appear obvious to outsiders as to why parents abuse, what would seem as a 'taken-for -granted' explanation, if applied to the family does not result in any dramatic alteration.

The problem of violence is both deeper and more pervasive than any facile explanation can incorporate, for its roots lie deep within capitalist society. For within the family what may, if discussed theoretically or politically have been evaluated as abuse, exploitation, repression, has now become routinised. It has become part of the everyday, and the social worker is left with this dilemma; how to make sense of something that is both commonplace and yet is morally and politically unacceptable. The social worker's emotional and personal closeness to her work and to the work of people may have a strength, for she knows in a way that no other can, the abusing parent's response to any confrontation or challenge to their childcare practice. Yet this closeness also acts as a barrier to developing a structural or political perspective. Within the emotional demands of the relationship, and the bureaucratic constraints of the organisation, it is difficult for her to stand outside, to take the view of critical theory. Her own everyday activities are embedded in an ideology that prevents an evaluation of, and a commentary on her own role, on the activities and responsibilities of the parent, the position of the parent under capitalism, its effect on the family members, and the response of society to abuse.

Hence although social work practice is seen as individualising social problems, this is a simplistic accusation, for society is not really able to understand the problem of child abuse. If it was, the problem of violence in the family, as at work, as in the

streets, as on the football terraces and as in various institutions, would be seen as related, and there would be large scale public discussions to understand the roots. Resources would be found and the media would be used to counteract the everyday violence of capitalism. The form of the family would in this process, be necessarily challenged and it would be seen for what it may be, a breeding ground for conformity, authoritarianism, and for the absorption and acceptance of the values of capitalism. The Welfare Model is then as practised and understood by the social worker, a complex response to the problems created by capitalist society. While recognising that the individual has choices, has made choices some of which are both personally and morally unacceptable, the social worker recognises as mitigating factors that these choices are not made 'freely'. They are constrained choices, constrained because of individual biography and history, because of economic circumstances and material realities, because they are choices made from the choices offered by capitalism.

The social worker because she is also part of that system, part of the choices, and part of the response defined within capitalism, finds that her choices are similarly constrained for her perceptions, her understanding is a part also of the capitalist system. Her response is therefore confused for while knowing that her client is statutorilly the child, in practice it is the family she is constrained to support. Given this contradiction it is difficult for the social worker to perceive the problems of child abuse as political, and to do with the structures and values of

capitalism. She can therefore work only in an opportunistic way, for to intervene in the family other than at a 'crisis', is to run the risk of the accusation of interference, for the family under capitalism, as I have argued, embodies the values of privacy, autonomy and individualism and therefore social work intervention into that arena is particularly problematic. The next section focuses on the problems of social work intervention in greater detail, but begins with an exposition of the State, since it is the State which formulates the framework in which she works. Hence social work practice manifests the contradictions of living under capitalism, and these may be interpreted and represented in different ways, as we shall see.

#### **Intervening in the Family: Social Work and the Welfare State**

Much criticism of bad childcare practice focuses on the social worker for being intrusive and unnecessarily destroying the family or alternatively points to the naivety of the social worker who leaves the child at risk (A Child in Trust, L.B. of Brent 1985, Cleveland Inquiry 1988). Thus there is a focus on the individual action of the social worker. Yet in this there is no recognition that the social worker is bound and constrained by the rules of the agency in which she works, or that she works according to statutes. The critics appear not to recognise that Social Service Departments are part of the Welfare State, and fail to take account of the complexities and the contradictions that

are part of her work. By focusing on the individual activities of the welfare workers, attention is diverted away from the larger structures, while simultaneously presenting the 'consumer' of welfare as invariably the victim of oppressive State apparatus.

This tendency to blame the 'low level worker' was noted and discussed in the early 1970's by the American sociologist, Gouldner. Writing of Becker's studies of drug takers, he writes,

Becker's argument is essentially a critique of the care-taking organisations, and in particular of the low level officialdom that manages them. It is not a critique of the social institutions that engender suffering or of the high level officialdom that shapes the character of caretaking establishments.

(Gouldner 1973 p.49)

And Mills made a similar point on the sociological studies of social problems, noting the lack of theory, their lack of discussion of politics and values, and their reliance on the 'objective'; the collection and dissemination of factual data. He writes,

The 'informational' character of social pathology is linked with a failure to consider social structures. Collecting and dealing in a fragmentary way with scattered problems and facts of *milieux*, these books are not focused on larger stratifications or upon structured wholes."

(Mills 1967 p.527)

He further comments that such texts are not written in "the context of discovery" but rather to further the careers of the writer and to contribute in a systematic way towards a text book. Such writings were therefore ultimately "apolitical" or "democratically opportunistic"; for they bypass social structures.

Society in these studies becomes fragmented into factors, into elemental bits, so Mills comments ironically, "[N]aturally one will then need quite a few of them to account for something, and one can never be sure they are all in." (Ibid. p.537)

Mills' own work sought to integrate biography into the specific historical moment. In a discussion of the responsibility and the proper concern for the sociologist in "The Sociological Imagination" (1970), Mills saw the tension between the crisis of history making as needing a restatement and a clarification. What was necessary was a discussion and an understanding of these so that one came to know the limits and the meaning of human freedom. He wrote,

Freedom is not merely the chance to do as one please; nor is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them - and then the opportunity to choose.....Within an individual's biography and within a society's history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided - within limits, to be sure, of historical possibility.

(Ibid. p.193)

We can apply these notions to a discussion of the Welfare State, for they depict both a conceptualisation of the relationship between the individual and the larger social structure, with a political and a moral concern. For it is as an agent of the Welfare State that the social worker intervenes into the abusing family, and it is the Welfare State that embodies within itself



its contradictory nature - that of care and control - just as the social work task also incorporates this contradiction.

I shall argue that the State is not a hegemonic institution, merely acting to administer the interests of the ruling class. This may in the last analysis be the case, but seen as a process, on a day to day level it represents a struggle between different classes and factions of classes, and between different ideologies. Yet neither can the State be understood as neutral, as being above society, for in a sense it represents the factions within society itself. It is true that the State appears in this way, for this is part of its bourgeois ideology. Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, pointed to the power of this ideology that existed alongside and in as pervasive form, as the structure and the organisation of the State. Writing of 'ideological hegemony', he saw class domination as exercised as much by popular 'consensus', as through coercion by the State's organisations, those of the police, the judiciary and the army. He wrote,

To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is 'psychological', they 'organise' human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle etc.

(Gramsci in Boggs 1976 p.37)

Thus the State and bourgeois society are not two different and opposing structures, for they are part of and reflect one other. The State acts to monitor, to control and to maintain a particular form of society, that of capitalism, but its activities are not always in the form of coercion. At particular moments converging

forces of the class struggle may impel the administration to act expediently, to act in the interests of the working class. These contingent moments leave spaces within the State organisations and within ideologies, and allow for the development of a counter hegemony. Yet for a class to take advantage of this, they must first have a consciousness of and a rejection of the values and the form of bourgeois society.

For Gramsci it was equally important to struggle against this as to mount class confrontation against political and economic institutions. I have also cited Mills' discussion of the notion of freedom, that freedom cannot be conceived of unless there is a reconceptualisation of the alternatives, to enlarge the scope of human decisions. For Mills, the task of the sociologist was not to define a set of human affairs that could be predicted, to perceive human relations as relations of unfreedom as Horkheimer has also noted, but rather to decide what is to be the future within the limits of historical possibility.

In another analysis by socialists working within the State (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979), in their struggle to seek a new form of political practice for State workers, the writers point to the false dichotomy that portrays a division between those who work for and in the State, and those who consume its services. They note that workers in the Welfare State and the consumers of its services are often the same people. They note that as the

State cuts, so workers are increasingly subjected to more control, to more bureaucracy, to more accountability. They comment that the State obscures by its bureaucratic control, class and sex categories of inequality, and that part of the State's mythology is to separate the workers, the producers of the State's services, from the consumers. Yet the producers and the consumers are both the same, in terms of class and sex, and as feminists and socialists working within the State, there is an intensive awareness of the contradictions within their work. The question is therefore, how can the power of the State be opposed from within, and what kind of struggle can workers engage in?

The authors point to the struggle for resources as one form, but that the struggle against the relations between the people within State bureaucracies, its authoritarianism, its perpetuation of class, sex and race inequalities as another. They raise questions as to the definitions of problems and ask can they be redefined? How are needs expressed, can they be expressed and met in another way? How are resources managed, can they be managed in a different way? They argue the necessity for each individual to reflect on their own activity, and to consider how they can build strength and independence. They write,

Counter organisation involves asserting our needs, our definitions. In the context of inescapable daily class antagonism, it means rejecting roles, ways of doing things and definitions which deflect and obscure this conflict.

(Ibid. p.50.)

Thus social work intervention into the family is built upon the contradiction between supplying needs, but only insofar as capital can continue to be produced. While the social worker struggles to manage this contradiction, the family's repression of women and children comes to be concealed. There is a process of mystification, so when a child is abused or bullied, the social worker is held responsible or the defects in the administrative organisation are pointed to. Hence the pervasive problems of the social order are avoided, as is the family's own reproduction of capital's social relations. While the social worker can be held responsible, the family's own collusion and acceptance of oppression will not be identified.

These points will be clarified if we analyse three studies, which adopt different perspectives on social work intervention in child abuse cases. The discussion will consider through these, how child abuse is understood, the nature of parental responsibility and the role of the family within capitalism. It will examine how the social work role is evaluated, in terms of controlling family autonomy and protecting the child.

The first, by Parton, has little to say on the subject of child abuse, since his concern is primarily to consider social work policy and practice in working within this field. Hence his critique is primarily focused on social work intervention, which Parton sees as repressive since it is primarily targeted on poor families.

Dingwall et al.'s research is an ethnographic study of the process of decision making within a Social Service Department, but their interpretation of data, set within an explicit liberal framework, is, despite its strength, ultimately limited in understanding child abuse.

Goldstein et al.'s thesis acknowledges the reality of child abuse, but they are, on occasions - as for example in their view of sexual abuse - ambivalent as to whether it is the parent's responsibility. They argue for the parents' right to raise their children as they see fit, to delimit state intervention and thereby to maintain family autonomy.

The following elaborates on these points.

**The social worker as moral entrepreneur: Parton's thesis of child abuse as moral panic**

Though Parton has written fairly extensively on child abuse, (1979,81,83) and more generally on child care policy (1985), his major thesis is to be found in "The Politics Of Child Abuse" (1985). Parton's general aim is to give a political and structural explanation, a sociological explanation to the phenomenon of child abuse.

In the opening chapter of "The Politics...." he writes that he wishes to consider the changing role of the State, its relations to the economy and the family, and to understand why certain forms of

parental behaviour are defined as "inappropriate and abusive" (Ibid. p.12). Writing from within the framework of deviancy theory, Parton sees the concern over child abuse as part of a "moral panic", and that child abuse is a label applied by social workers who act as agents of the State. He writes that social workers increasingly intervene in ways that are "authoritarian, intrusive and insistent", such that the removal of a child from its parents is now seen as a first rather than a last resort (1981 p.392). He writes, "[I]t is only child abuse if it has been prescribed in a given society and if the control agencies act in such a way as to enforce that prescription." (1985 p.148) - a view that apparently assumes an experience is only 'real' if defined as such by a State agency. In a discussion of media reaction to the death of Maria Colwell, he comments that this anxiety is about the decline of the family, the growth of violence and permissiveness and of inadequate families. Violence, he writes, is seen to be equated with permissiveness and inadequate families (1985 p.80).

Parton points to child care policies developing in certain ways that are epitomised by the underlying principles of the 1975 Children Act. The child's needs were emphasised over those of the parents, the child was to be separately represented, and local authorities were given greater powers to sever parental ties. The British agency for Adoption and Fostering subsequently advocated that children in care should, after a stated amount of time be placed in permanent families and adopted. Parton calls this practice, the "social market economy doctrine" (CSP 1985).

Having sketched out a framework of interpretation as to why there is an interest in child abuse, Parton proceeds to suggest an alternative thesis. He rightly rejects the disease model of child abuse, for he notes that there are no clear cut distinctions between abusers and non-abusers, though he does not pause to reflect on the significance of this. He considers the "socio-cultural" approach of Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, and the structuralist accounts of Gil, but finally advocates, on the basis of a reading of statistics, an association between poverty and child abuse.

Parton dismisses the arguments of statistical bias i.e. that since the poor are more visible and have fewer resources to escape the attentions of State officials, it is they who enter into the statistics. When he writes of the experience of child abuse as a "label", Parton does further violence to its phenomenon. Parton writes from the perspective of an adult middle class male, one who has not, to judge from his analysis, much contact or practice with the reality of child abuse.

Nelson's comments are here apposite, for in noting the social devaluation of the sexually abused girl's experiences, she writes of

the sheltered upbringing of many educated liberals. They draw on a world free of serious exploitation and sordid experience...Their view is optimistic, some would say irresponsibly naive.

(Nelson 1982 p.32)

Though it is true that child abuse has become in recent years a public issue, the moral panic argument is it would seem inappropriately applied to the problem of child abuse. It was developed initially by a sociologist of deviancy, Stan Cohen, who sought to understand the manufacture of a social problem by analysing media reaction to certain youth cultures. Cohen wrote that a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to social values and interests, and this is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the media. As a consequence of this the moral barricades come to be manned. (1980) In using this framework Parton implies that it is the label that causes deviance, and that it is a purely subjective category imposed by the powerful. Thus Parton in using this model to understand social reaction to child abuse, ignores the real and evident suffering of children in the family. Surely it is the child who is the victim here, not the parent. His thesis in effect neutralises the problem of child abuse, for in writing within a framework of deviancy Parton would seem to justify and protect the parent from any responsibility. In an interesting comment on this kind of justification for deviant behaviour, Sykes and Matza wrote,

Disapproval flowing from internalised norms and conforming others in the social environment is neutralised, turned back, and deflected in advance...he remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are 'acceptable' if not 'right'.

They called this the 'technique of neutralization.' (Sykes and Matza 1957) Parton thus appears not to understand the phenomenon of child abuse, and his argument by implication refers primarily to physical abuse. His argument veers between positivism, its



reliance on a reading of statistics for his thesis, and an extreme subjectivism, in his advocacy of labelling theory. His argument goes no further than the superficial, for he has no analysis of the contradictions within the State, nor of that connection between social work intervention into the family, nor of the relations within it as they reflect and are part of the economic and social structure.

**The social worker and the confrontation of paternal absolutism:  
Dingwall et al.'s thesis of the liberal State**

Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray's study of social work and the abusing family is a sophisticated, ethnographic study over a five year period of three Social Service Departments. They, like Parton, see the definition of child abuse as socially constructed, but they also see its definition as a process within a Social Service Department. Basing their analysis on participant observation and working from within a bureaucracy of a Social Service office, they are able to describe and to critically comment on the complexities of the social work task.

Since they conceptualise child abuse as part of a decision making process, the authors seek to understand the culture of decision making as it relates to and is part of the structure of a local authority Social services Department. The authors are explicit about their political orientation, for they perceive and set their account within the framework of what they call the liberal society.

This openness and clarity in their politics enables them to debate the dilemmas which State intervention creates by threatening the values of the liberal society; the regulation of the family, the monitoring of parents, the contradiction between children's rights, which is seen at the minimum as a respect for their physical integrity, and adult liberties, to decide for themselves the quality of their parenting.

Parents are not in this account victims as they appear to be in for example, Parton's account. They appear as active participants within the process of the making of decisions as to whether or not children can be said to be abused. The authors clearly recognise the power of the parent at every stage of the process. They write,

The identification of child abuse or neglect is similarly related to the visibility of children and the respective power of parents and surveillance agencies.

(Ibid. p.81)

The interests of the children can easily become obscured by the interests of adults in such a context to a degree which minimises the possibilities of identifying mistreatment.

(Ibid. p.105.)

They classify parental justification for mistreatment, the denial the child was injured, the denial of the victim, that the child deserved it, condemning the condemners by diverting attention to others who abuse but who have escaped the attention of the Social Services or by attacking the integrity or the concern of the social worker. They observe the 'sad tale', that the parent could not help it, that they were subjected to intolerable stresses, and finally justifications that appeal to different philosophies of

life, to religion, to culture and to different life styles. (Ibid. p.198) Apart from these parental justifications, there are other neutralising factors which from the onset of the first referral, act to screen out the majority of child abuse referrals. As noted previously, these are the beliefs of the social worker, the beliefs in the parent's 'natural love' for their children, and the 'cultural relativism' argument. This latter belief was seen by the authors as an "agency justification", for while conceding that child abuse has occurred, the social worker believed it to be permissible or required by the particular circumstances (Ibid. p.82). Dingwall et al. call these beliefs "the rule of optimism" for they served to reinforce social work evaluations. The case conference too was seen to be riven with competing perceptions, for whereas the social worker was earlier making preliminary decisions based on interpretation of social evidence in the context of clinical judgement, here the problem was that of social evidence in the context of legal proof. Whereas social evidence depended on a picture comprising a history of personal and family knowledge, of perceptions, of interpretation from both direct and indirect sources, evidence for lawyers was of a different order.

Lawyers acting in care proceedings are bound by The Rules of Evidence, and these preclude information from hearsay sources. Secondly, 'opinion' was only acceptable from 'expert witnesses, and the authors found the classification of social workers as expert witnesses to be variable. Thirdly, civil proceedings, like care

proceedings, cannot include statements on the character of the parties. In practice these rules are loosely applied.

The authors observed another anomaly, also common to the practising social worker, which further reinforces the power of the parents vis a vis the child's rights. That is, although the child was legally entitled to his or her own solicitor separately from that of the local authority or of the parent, this was treated as a legal fiction so the parents were in fact represented or the solicitor sought to take both an independent view of the child's interests while simultaneously assisting and advising the parent. The latter was the most common (Ibid. p.173). The authors conclude their ethnographic study by commenting, "Care proceedings are the end of a very long line of decisions where alternative outcomes are preferred at each and every stage." Their research showed that "Care proceedings are an extreme remedy for an extreme situation." (Ibid. p.206)

Dingwall et al.'s study of decision making in child abuse cases is an accurate portrayal of the complexities of the social work task in local authority settings. As the authors were participant observers, their writing has an authenticity about it which can only be derived from working 'within'. Yet at the same time the authors were sufficiently distanced to remain critical, so their interpretations were 'of it' but not 'in it'.

It is not then their interpretations of everyday practice that can be faulted, but rather it is how they locate these interpretations within a particular political economy that I would take issue with. For what underlies their thesis is a certain political orientation, the belief in the liberal society; yet because they are open and explicit as to their value orientation, one can openly debate with them the implications of their view. Thus Dingwall, Bekelaar and Murray do not attempt to provide any form of explanation or discussion as to the nature of child abuse, rather their focus is on the nature of state intervention into the family and a consideration as to whether it can be justified given the values of the liberal society. It is not however acceptable to say as they do, "[W]e must take the liberal social order as an object of study rather than of criticism," (Ibid p.212.) for to accept this would certainly bring to an end any critical discussion and would furthermore, seem to assume that these two forms of orientation, study and criticism are incompatible. So what is their understanding of the liberal state?

In the authors' evaluation, we see in essence the market economy perspective of democracy. From a Marxist point of view it is essentially the view of the bourgeoisie, for the State is seen as a neutral arbiter, it 'checks and balances' the arbitrary exercise of power, which in this case is the actions of parents against their children. They write,

If large-scale organisation is to survive, with the social and economic gains from the division of labour, some substitute regulation must be developed to control the impact of private deviance of others... It is here that the

liberal State becomes involved, through its role as the guarantor of the last resort. The State is itself, founded on market principles, in the competition between the parties for votes and for powers, between legislature, judiciary and the executive. Such competition in effect mimics the accountability of citizens to each other through their market relations.

(Ibid. p.214)

I have quoted the passage fully, as it expresses particularly clearly the politics of the authors. It is not an analysis that I support for reasons I earlier discussed, though I will elaborate on this further subsequently.

The authors do not however avoid the issue of power in the family, for this is for them the locus of the potential for the exercise of arbitrary power, which legitimates the intervention of the state. Noting that the very young children are the most vulnerable, they write that parental power can be restrained only by external surveillance, and that 'paternal absolutism' is 'antithetical to liberal principles'. (Ibid. p.216). It is between these two statements, paternal absolutism and liberal principles, that I part company with them, for paternal absolutism is also antithetical to feminists and socialists.

Yet paternal absolutism cannot be understood within the framework of liberalism, for the exercise of such 'arbitrary power' is located within a society based on class and sex inequalities. Liberalism cannot incorporate into its analysis any explanation of this, for it is based on the principles of the 'self-governing' market. A market which is the ebb and flow of contracts and

transactions does not recognise contradiction between opposing interests, those who own property and those who do not, but only differences which can be resolved by the democratic compromise. Hence Dingwall et al. write of the "compromise" between the liberal principles of the "family autonomy" and of uninvited surveillance by state workers.

In writing of the market concept of political theory, the philosopher Macpherson had this to say:

Democracy is reduced from a humanist aspiration to a market equilibrium system. And although the new orthodox theory claims scientific neutrality, its value judgement is clear enough: whatever works is right - that is, whatever enables the existing class stratified society to operate without intolerable friction is best.

(Macpherson 1973 p.79)

It is this thinking which underlines their thesis, and which therefore prevents a deeper and more critical analysis than the authors are prepared to contemplate. Sophisticated and perceptive though their analysis is, it fails ultimately because liberal theory acts as a constraint. For within this political view of the world, it is simply not possible to construct a theory which makes sense of the relationship between the nature of the family, the state and the economy.

**The social worker as an agent of the State: Goldstein et al.'s thesis of the family as a defence against State absolutism**

In "Before the Best Interests of the Child", Goldstein, Freud and Solnit represent the viewpoint of a lawyer, a Freudian psychoanalyst and a social worker respectively. They are concerned to delimit the circumstances in which the state may justifiably intervene in the family. Their writing thus addresses possible circumstances, and the ways in which legally speaking, the state can be seen to act fairly and legitimately in this action. Thus the main body of their work focuses on possible grounds for intervention, requests from parents to place children, or from long term carers to become a child's parents, and failures in parental care. The child is only considered as having separate needs from the parent in the context of the possibility of separate legal representation. In their final chapters they make suggestions as to a "Child Placement Code", which builds on their earlier work, "Beyond the Best Interests of the Child".

Their opening chapter entitled, "State Decisions to Intrude on Parent-Child Relationships" sets the tone and the style of their presentation of their views. They assert their "conviction", a belief in minimum state intervention, that parents should be entitled to raise their children as they see fit, and that the child needs the continuity of care from "autonomous" (i.e. free from state interference) parents. Where there are circumstances in which the state can intervene, and here the authors move from the



use of the word "intrude" to "intervene", then the child's needs must be paramount.

Much of their argument is rhetoric, their concepts atavistic and their use of language legalistic. It is designed less to analyse and to understand, more to persuade, and since the authors back their assertions with evidence from law, their manner is more in the style of a submission. Reading their work one begins to feel like a member of a jury, as the authors drive their point home again and again. Unsurprisingly the authors leave unexamined the nature of the family and its relation with political-economy or the state. Thus one forms an impression of their views, in passing, as it were.

What then is their view of the family? To understand this, one must also consider their view of the parent and the child. Essentially the authors' views are profoundly ideological and deeply conservative for there is an unexamined replication of the family as private and as autonomous, with the parent portrayed as benevolent and as invariably knowing what is best. It is paternalism writ large.

They write that the child's paramount interests lie in the "preservation of his family", an interesting choice of words for there is the implication that it is the child that has responsibility for maintaining the family (Ibid. p.5). Yet they also point to the child being at risk, dependent and without

capacity or authority to decide for themselves without "parental control"! The adult on the other hand, is free to take risks, has independent capacity and authority to decide what is best (Ibid. p.7).

For the authors the danger of state intervention is, it would seem, the threat of the child perceiving the parent in a way they would prefer not be seen. For example, they write that when the state intrudes, the child's beliefs that his parents are omniscient and all-powerful are shaken prematurely (Ibid. p.9). The parent has, they say, a "right" to be free of state intrusion, and the child's right is conversely, for parental autonomy. They seem not to have any knowledge, that since parents abuse this power and autonomy, the child may also have 'rights' which may be at odds with the parent, quite separately from what the state may see as its role.

They depict the child's position in the family as overwhelmingly dependent. Any assertion of an independence of view, or of wishes that may threaten this parental omniscience, is firmly quashed. Even the minimal assistance offered to a child, by their own lawyer is seen by these authors as a threat. For example:

The appointment of counsel for a child without regard to the wishes of parents is a drastic alteration of the parent-child relationship... It intrudes upon the integrity of the family and strains the psychological bonds that hold it together.

(Ibid p.112).

To demonstrate their point, they relate an incident whereby a child aged ten, attempted to invoke their help in intervening between his

divorcing parents. They smugly assert their own power in defining what was best for the child. Thus they comment:

What Charles mistakenly sought to arrogate to himself was the status of an adult. He tried to choose his counsel, instruct them with regard to his wishes and intentions, and with their help fight his case with his parents... But, every child before the law finds himself in the position where the adults 'know best' what is good for him and decides that with or without regard to his wishes.

(Ibid. p.122)

One wonders how the authors justify the investment of such power and authority, and on closer examination we find an atavistic belief in the biological bond between parent and child. It is the mythical union of the 'blood tie' that underlies their premise. They write that they respect parental rights based on the fact of reproduction, and that they see the biological connection as a powerful motivating force for most parents to provide their children with "continuous affectionate and responsible care" (Ibid. p.133).

Given such beliefs, it is not surprising that the authors view with such alarm state intervention, for the activities of the state invade this 'natural union' of the bond between parent and child which is formalised legally and psychologically in the institution of the family.

The State can only legitimately intervene then according to the authors, where there is risk of serious bodily injury, or where the parent died or disappeared. "Minor assaults" on a child's body should be excluded as a basis for intervention, while their

discussion on sexual abuse and emotional neglect indicates their Freudian training. For example, although they recognise behaviour in a child such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal or aggression may indicate emotional damage, they also assert that observing this behaviour is not enough, for the reasons may be varied. Hence the fault may lie within the child, for it may be fearful of being overwhelmed by "his own sexual or aggressive impulses" (Ibid p.76).

Such a view is repeated in their discussion of sexual abuse. They write that children participating in sexual activities are not always unwilling, for "only too frequently" the child is willing to cooperate, for their secret fantasies create "pleasurable erotic excitement" (Ibid p.63). One wonders here whether it is the child or the parent that the authors refer to. The authors thus advocate that the state should not intrude for the harm may be greater by dragging these incidents into the open (sic) unless the state has a less detrimental alternative. They do concede that there is a place for assistance, but only if the parent on their initiative seeks psychological help.

Taken as a whole, "Before the Best Interests of the Child" is profoundly conservative in the view of the parent, the child, the family and the State. There is no attempt to analyse these relationships or to question their own underlying beliefs. Children are depicted as the property of the parent, and the parent's right to dispose of this property in almost any manner they so wish, is unceasingly advocated. The authors write

endlessly of parents' rights, but there is little reference to either the child's rights or their needs. Since their work is so legalistically inclined, their aim, to have clear guidelines which legitimate state intervention is achieved but this is at a cost. This cost is a massive over-simplification of the complexities of child care decision making, and an avoidance or denial of the abusing power of the parent.

Working in child care is not simply a question of rights or wrongs, for it means working in confusing and contradictory family relationships where the child's need to separate and to be helped is quite independent from parents' rights over them, to define what is 'best' for them. Quite clearly the state, whether social work, legal or medical intervention, may exercise on occasions an arbitrary power and may also be unable to provide a clearly better alternative to the abusive family, but that is the responsibility of society and of communities as a whole. To write in the manner of an outraged Victorian mill owner whose rights over his properties are challenged, is not helpful in furthering a more progressive, child orientated practice.

#### **Summary and Discussion: How can Child Abuse be Understood?**

This chapter has critically reviewed theoretical and empirical accounts of child care and abuse, and draws on the work in the previous chapter. I began the discussion with an exploration into

the problems of defining abuse. I argued that definitions turned the relationship between the parent and the child into a 'thing', so abuse was represented as an event and only as having a reality if it could be seen in terms of a physical sign. I noted also that definitions created problems if understood as guides to practice, because of the complexity of the behaviour, and response. I noted that its identification depended on, in reality, the negotiation between different agencies.

I then considered explanations of abuse which I categorised into three broad areas, those focusing on the apparent intention of the abuser. These were the voluntarist, the determinist and the welfare model.

I argued that the welfare model was the most comprehensive in that it incorporated notions of the individual and their capacity to exercise choice, but as this was constrained by the material and ideological world, I concluded that research into the cause of child abuse was conflicting and often stated the obvious; that the causes were many and varied. I noted that such research was often theoretically poor in that there was no attempt to understand the relationship between the individual and the larger social order, or the element of choice that was open to an individual within a given situation. Research was therefore primarily of an informational sort.

Finally, I reviewed three studies which focused on intervention in the family by social workers, as representative of the Welfare State. I argued that the State was neither neutral, nor invariably hegemonic, nor acted as an arbitrator, but that it incorporated within itself the contradictions of capitalism. This means that social work practice contains within itself both caring and controlling motivations. The social worker must, on occasions, control parental behaviour, in order that the child be cared for, and by this intervention thereby challenged patriarchy, as well as the family's need for privacy and autonomy.

In critically reviewing these three studies, I held in mind the authors' views of the family, of children, of abuse and of State intervention. All three works have a view of State intervention: in Parton and Goldstein et al's case, it is extremely critical and somewhat simplistic. Their accounts included no discussion of the relationship between the State and the family. Neither was the family seen to be related to the political economy - the assumption was that it was an autonomous unit, thereby reproducing 'the family as a privatised institution' argument.

Dingwall et al. showed an awareness of the complexities of parental duties as opposed to rights, and how this informed social work practice. In the case of a failure of parental duties, they argued that the State had a duty in such circumstances to take responsibility for the children in the abusing family. Since their work was also based on participant observation, it had an

authenticity and a richness of view that was lacking in the other works.

Goldstein's and Parton's theses also largely objectified the child, for the child was apparently only seen in relationship to either parental or to State control. Parton's work gives not even the most cursory discussion to the child as an independent agent, indeed he appears most anxious that the child's rights should not even be considered separately from those of the parents' (Parton 1985 p.185).

Dingwall et al.'s work in comparison does have an understanding of the child's position in or out of the family, for there is a discussion of different perceptions of children. They do not however go so far as treating the child as a potential independent subject, for underlying their position is benign paternalism. They would like the system to work better after all, rather than it be overturned.

Thus in conclusion, although these studies can be loosely classified as representative of the political spectrum, it is ironic that the middle position, the 'liberal' position, does appear to embody a deeper understanding of the problems of working with child abuse with a clear analysis of the politics of state intervention.



Hence the discussion here has focused on the ~~management~~ of child abuse in terms of how definitions inform practice and an understanding of child abuse from the perspective of the social worker, what possible explanations are proffered, and how the social worker's role can be understood politically in terms of her intervention into the family. The concern here has therefore been on the organisational aspects of child abuse work.

Yet in following through these familiar arguments, even though I have attempted to critically review them, there has been an avoidance of other ways of perceiving child abuse. In the previous chapter I argued that child abuse cannot simply be understood as an event, isolated from family life as an expression of or as a reflection of the social order. I argued that child abuse is related to gender and generational inequalities which are part of everyday family life. Without again rehearsing that argument, it is possible to use this perspective in re-interpreting the phenomenon of child abuse. The focus therefore switches from the organisational aspects to discussing how we perceive children and childcare.

So the question is not how is child abuse defined and ~~managed~~, but what view of children and their care ~~informs~~ our own practice? More specifically, how common is it to hit children, and can this be seen as part of the continuum of the abuse of children? Posing the problem in this way addresses the theoretical argument made previously: that child abuse is partly a manifestation of

generational inequality and is a reflection of the power of the parent over the child.

There have been a number of empirical, large scale sociological surveys that have addressed these questions. For example, Skolnick and Skolnick argue that all child-rearing is permeated with abuse, so that assaults on children in the form of shouting, smacking or hitting are commonplace. They write,

To be aware of this, one only has to look at the families of one's friends, and neighbours, to look and listen to the parent child interactions at the playground or super-market, or even to recall how one was raised oneself. The amount of yelling, slapping, scolding, punching, hitting and yanking acted out on very small children is almost shocking. We are not observing an isolated, unique phenomenon, but only the extreme form of what we call a pattern or style of child rearing quite persistent in our culture.

(1974 p.330)

And in their study of the parenting of 700 seven year old children, the Newsons concluded that violence for the child is part of the everyday in the family (Newson and Newson in Tutt 1976). Yet this is only to consider the physical abuse of children, other forms of denegrating and abusing children are commonplace. Children also have to contend with overt disapproval, extreme and unrestrained irritation, inconsistency, lack of support, demands from the parent to fulfill their needs, to demonstrate uncritical displays of affection, and passive acceptance and admiration of the parent.

Hence abuse in the family is not a rare event. It is not limited to those labelled inadequate or psychopathic, or to the poor or to the stressed, for it is woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Violence towards children is seen as an appropriate solution to the problems and frustrations of the adult world. What would be unacceptable in the street, in the office, on the factory floor is legitimated within the family for the family above all, is a violent institution, as the following empirical research indicates.

In Gelles' study of 80 families, the researchers noted an acceptance of violence, so that incidents were considered normal, routine and as needing little justification. They were thought to be necessary for the family to be able to continue its existence, and were seen therefore to be legitimate. (Gelles 1972. p.58) (1)  
Gelles writes,

The family more than any other social institution, is the primary mechanism for teaching norms, values and techniques of violence (be it in the street or the home) our attention ought to be directed more towards the family more than, for example to the effects of television violence on children or the impact of corporal punishment in school.

(Ibid. p. 169)

And in Strauss et al.'s large scale national study some years later, the researchers concluded that only the military in time of war is more violent than the American family (1981 p. 4). Yet one cannot write of abuse and violence, without considering that it takes place within the context of a relationship. This relationship between the parents and the child takes place within the context of the family, and is predicated on beliefs in its legitimacy. Violence is legitimised because it is seen in some way as an acceptable and presumably inevitable part of child rearing.

Yet what is this notion of acceptability and inevitability, and how can it be understood?

To write of violence within the context of the parent-child relationship, and to recognise its legitimization is, it would seem, to bring in associations of punishment, of discipline and of authority. It is this which is contained within the atmosphere and within the context of the family. Abuse, of which violence is a part, consists of these legitimated notions. Within parental authority, within the development of the abusing relationship, there is a drift between a belief in the rightness of the authority and its subsequent expression as a punishing authoritarianism. The parents' control and punishment of the child expresses the socially constructed hierarchy of power of the parent over the child. This manifestation of power is ultimately connected with gender roles and the position of the family within patriarchal capitalism.

For example, in a large scale nation wide study of family violence it was found that there was a close relationship between child abuse and spouse abuse. The researchers discovered that those who are violent towards their children tend also to be violent towards their spouse. Parents who witnessed violence as a child and experienced violence, became the most violent of all. Teenagers who were beaten have a rate of wife beating four times greater than those whose parents who did not (Strauss 1981 p.110). There is therefore a relationship between child abuse and matrimonial violence.

The power of the parent over the children rests not only on their obvious access to material factors, to economic resources, to greater physical strength, but also on the legitimating force of the rightness of the adult view of the world. This is expressed in its most crude form by the forceful physical action of the parent against the child, but more insidiously will insist on for the child a definition i.e. an adult perception of the world.

Lukes, in a discussion of the concept and exercise of power, situates power in the context of a system that can mobilise, recreate and reinforce ways of being and ways of perception, that may be neither consciously chosen nor have an intended result. Power is socially structured and culturally patterned, a bias is created that is constantly mobilised and perpetuated within the form of the organisation (Lukes 1974). The form of this organisation, the family, without any conscious effort perpetuates a hegemony of belief in its own benevolence (that parents love and care for their children), its own authority (parents have the right to rear their children as they see fit), and a belief in its separateness from the rest of society (the idea of family privacy and the right to be free of any intervention).

Such beliefs are repressive as they legitimate in an unchallenged and virtually unchallengeable way parental power over children. Thus the nature of child abuse becomes difficult to understand and to recognise, for without first confronting the power of the parent and their view, one is unable to see the child.

This inability to "see" the child, to know what meaning family life, abuse and punishment have for them, is of course part of the mystificatory process of the social order. In the opening chapters I commented on this, drawing on my experience as a social worker, and also the experience in struggling for access. To understand, then, the totality of child abuse, it is necessary to also consult the child. The following chapters in Part III address these issues. They draw on the theoretical work so far developed, and seek to contextualise this with an appreciation of the child's point of view, as they perceive life in the family.

## CHAPTER 5- NOTES

1. The problem with intention in child abuse is a fundamental one, yet it is rarely discussed. The exception to this is within feminist accounts of sexual abuse.
2. To test the truth of this statement one need only enter with others a discussion of childrearing. A typical response if one says that one has renounced violence as a method of control, is shocked disbelief that it can work, or laughter at supposed naivety.
3. This was clearly a factor in the Jasmine Beckford case, since the social worker's energies and interests were wholly directed to establishing a relationship with the parents. See "Child in Trust" (1985), The Panel of Inquiry, Brent.
4. Though they do not consider it, the 'rule of optimism' noted by Dingwall et al. also has a personal significance for the worker, apart from screening out the majority of abuse cases. A social worker's training is generally speaking based on assumptions that people can and wish to change. There is therefore a tendency to accept behaviour that is threatening and sometimes aggressive, in the hope of change. I would contend that without some elements of this belief, the social work task would be most depressing.
5. Case Conferences, and Child Abuse or Child 'Protection' Registers are required by law following a series of governmental circulars in the form of Statutory Instruments to local authorities since the mid 1970s.
6. For an interesting account of the process of bargaining between the lawyer and the social worker in Case Conferences, see this chapter in Dingwall et al. (1983).
7. In practice, laws are unevenly applied according to class, ethnic group or sex. See, e.g., Jack Young, "What is to be Done about Law and Order", Penguin, 1985.

## PART III

### CHILDREN'S ACCOUNT OF FAMILY LIFE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE

#### CHAPTER 6

##### UNDERSTANDING CHILDHOOD THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

###### Introduction

This section addresses the experience of childhood, firstly in Chapter 6 through a reading of autobiographies, and secondly in Chapter 7 by giving an account of my interviews with children. The advantages and problems of using qualitative material are discussed earlier in Chapter 3. What follows is a discussion as to how children experience their lives in the family, and how parenting is influenced by work and gender, and how mystification is manifested, as discussed in Chapter 4. It is not then, either an historical account or a materialist account of how childhood is constructed, although I briefly allude to these approaches in discussing the concept of the child and childhood.

Analysing experience can be seen both as a source of knowledge and as a way of locating biography in social structure. Exploring



autobiographical representations of childhood is also a method by which one may sensitise oneself to the issues, the events and the problems of childhood. This analysis and reflection derived from my reading are intended therefore to inform my orientation when talking to children about their lives in the family. It is not, however, an 'innocent reading', for the reasons I elaborated earlier in the methodological chapter, but also because I read from a particular theoretical orientation. Hence these accounts of childhood are organised around themes identified theoretically: alienation through the discussion of work and parenting and the consequent objectification of children; the construction of gender through the discussion of sexuality, expectations of gender behaviour, and identification with the parent; and the mystification of these processes through a discussion of the domination of the child and the child's description of the nature of abuse.

Firstly, however, I discuss the concept of the child and childhood drawing on the work of historians, sociologists and lawyers.

Secondly, through a reading of the autobiographies, I consider the nature of the relationship between the two roles of parent and worker, and ask how that relationship informs the care of the child.

Thirdly I explore the differences between gender experiences within childhood, and ask what implications this may have for the

identity of the child in terms of passivity, dominance or subordination.

Fourthly I ask how does the child experience painful events, situations or relationships? I then compare these experiences with the earlier organisational definitions of abuse, and develop an alternative understanding of abuse, one more authentic to the experiences depicted here.

### **The Concept of the Child and Childhood**

The concept of childhood and the child is problematic and indefinable. The child cannot be imagined except in relation to the adult world, but for the child the world is experienced for itself. It is lived more than as a state of being, it is also of becoming. Childhood is ultimately socially constituted. The adult world formally categorises by age, by physical growth, by emotional development and by legal responsibility, but these are not logically related to one another. Children are aware of these categorisations and the importance of them. How else can a child's emphasis and concern with their actual, precise age be understood? Such categories conform to adult definitions of the child and their management of them, and thereby by implication devalue the child's own sense of experience and of being. Underlying such categorisations lies the ultimate goal, to become

adult. All language, games, pastimes and fantasies are seen as "childish", crude precursors to the proper world of the adult.

Historically speaking the child was not seen as a different order of person until the seventeenth century. Until that time the child was part of a communal and neighbourly life; their lives were integrated alongside those of the adult. Aries comments that the role of the child in the Middle Ages was to amuse the adult world as if they were "little dogs or monkeys". By the seventeenth century "the moralists and pedagogues" began to develop the idea of the child's weakness and innocence, and they therefore advocated that children should be educated according to a system of moral and social education (Aries 1973). As a matter of fact, Aries' thesis pertains only to the middle class or aristocratic male child, for the experience of the female child was different. Essential to her learning was, as is, the development of an ability to empathise with and to serve others. From an early age, girls learnt this by serving in other people's houses (Gathorne-Hardy 1972 p.34).

In Anderson's review of the literature pertaining to the status of children and parents in pre-industrial England, he pointed out that people were socially categorised in terms of their relationship to the process of domestic production. There were thus three social classes: owners of capital and land, non-property owners with realisable labour power, and non-property owners who were incapable of defending property claims or of

contributing to production (young children and dependent adults). So in general terms, the law viewed children by analogy with property (in Dingwall and Eekelaar, in press). Hence parents could bring legal actions for compensation following the loss of a child's labour or the diminution of his or her exchange value as a prospective marriage partner (Ibid).

As the nature of property changed (from land to commerce), it was recognised that children (in fact boys) could make little contribution without specialised training. So children were prepared for adult life by learning technical skills and a morality to regulate their use, and in this their learning and lives were more carefully controlled.

This was reproduced in legislation which now controlled the children of the poor. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a series of Acts was passed, whereby parishes were required to receive or to remove children whose parents were vagrants, destitute or dead, and they were to be apprenticed to a trade. As Dingwall and Eekelaar point out, Elizabethan legislation was concerned by the apparent threat to the social order from the landless peasant (Ibid).

By the mid nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, with consequent effects on both children and family life. Engels in "The Condition of the Working Class in England" (1969 ed.) documents the unregulated exploitation of the working

class not only within the factories, but also pointing to the effects this exploitation had on family life. Engels' study is of the Manchester working class from "personal observation and authentic sources", but he also uses evidence presented to the growing numbers of governmental committees, particularly to the factory inspectorate. Much of what he describes was equally applicable to the Midlands, to Birmingham, and to the pottery towns of North Staffordshire. He observes how the increasing industrial concentration of people around the factories, who were uprooted from the countryside, forms the slums of underpaid and starving proletariat.

Within the factories, the employment of children was as common as that of adults, and there was no distinction made between their working conditions. Manufacturers would begin to employ children "occasionally" aged five, "often" by the age of six, and by the time they were aged eight or nine, the working day was between fourteen and sixteen hours, and this excluded meals and intervals. While working, "onlookers" and the manufacturers themselves regularly flogged and maltreated the children (Engels 1969 p. 179).

Even children under the control of the Poor Law authorities were not exempt from the rapacity of the manufacturing process. They had few rights and received no protection from any source, since they were "rented out" to factory owners as apprentices. Here

they would be lodged, fed and clothed in common, and treated with the "utmost recklessness and barbarity" (Ibid p.178).

Using evidence presented to the Factory Inquiry Commission of 1833, Engels reports that the Commissioners noted "the crowd of cripples who appeared before them, who clearly owed their distortion to the long working hours". Dr. London, one of the Commissioners, wrote, "... many have died prematurely, and others are afflicted for life with defective constitutions, and the fear of a paternity enfeebled by the stunted constitution of the survivors is but too well founded from a physiological point of view." And the evidence provided by a Dr. Hawkins depicts the appearance of the Manchester child as "depressed", "very pale" with "nothing of the usual mobility, liveliness, and cheeriness of youth" (Ibid p.186).

This exploitation in the form of long hours, low wages, poor nutrition and bad working conditions, inevitably affected the family. Both Marx and Engels made mordant observations on the family's disruption caused by rapid dislocation. They point to the instability of the working class family, the lack of authority by parents, the lack of care for children by parents, and for parents by children, and that there was no stable environment for adequate psychological development. Engels, writing presumably of children not yet old enough to work, says,

In many families the wife, like the husband, had to work away from home and the consequence is the total neglect of children, who are either locked up or given out to be taken care of.... It is, therefore, not to be wondered at if

hundreds of them perish through all manners of accidents. Nowhere are so many children run over, nowhere are so many killed by falling, drowning or burning, as in the great cities and towns of England.

(Ibid p.139)

For the noisy, difficult child, there was always "Godfrey's Cordial", hence,

Women who work at home, and have their own and other people's children to take care of, give them this drink to keep them quiet, and, as many believe, to strengthen them. They often begin to give this medicine to newly-born children, and continue, without knowing the effects of this "hearts-ease", until the children die. The less susceptible the child's system to the action of opium, the greater the quantities administered.

(Ibid p.135)

As for their intellectual and psychological development, Engels comments that children were "stolid, so hopelessly stupid, that they often asserted they were well treated, were coming on famously, when they were forced to work twelve to fourteen hours, were clad in rags, did not get enough to eat, and were beaten so that they felt it several days afterwards" (Ibid p.229).

Thus, as may be appreciated by this example, the inability by the child to understand their own abuse is not confined to the present century. Mystification was as prevalent then as now.

Marx also observed the abuse of the child, and linked this with the family's economic relations and the capitalist mode of production. He writes,

... large-scale industry, which broke up the economic foundations of the old family system and that of family labour appropriate to that system, was itself sweeping away the old family relations. The rights of children had to be

proclaimed. In the official report of the Children's Employment Commission of 1866 we read: "It is unhappy to a painful degree, apparent throughout the whole of the evidence, that against no persons do the children of both sexes so much require protection as against their parents." The system of unrestricted exploitation of child labour in general and of so-called homework in particular is maintained only because the parents are able, without check or control, to exercise this arbitrary and mischievous power over their young and tender offspring...

(Marx 1972 ed. p.528)

Marx comments that on the contrary it is not the misuse of parental authority over children, but rather that the capitalist method of exploitation, by sweeping away the appropriate economic basis to parental authority, transformed that authority into abuse (Ibid p.528).

It was because of this mass of evidence presented to the various Government Commissions on the factory worker, that a series of Factory Acts were passed between 1844 and the 1870s. They were to regulate the hours worked by women and children in the factories, although this curtailment of exploitation was won - e.g. in the case of the Ten Hours Bill - despite the opposition of the industrial bourgeoisie, by an alliance of the liberal philanthropists, the Benthamites, the "philosophic radicals" and the new M.P.'s representing the urban and industrial constituencies created by the Reform Act (Richards in Corrigan 1980).

Apart from the concern over factory children, there was a large number of 'rootless' children identified by the growing number of



voluntary organisations during the nineteenth century, as tending to drift into vice or petty crime. Such children were gathered together into homes which taught them factory, workshop and domestic skills.

What were the motives of such activities? Dingwall and Eekelaar make a distinction between those pertaining to organisational mores, "the mores of the monogamous family, Christianity and nationalism", and humanitarian mores: those expressive of a concern to make the world a better place to live in or to remedy the misfortunes of others. In their opinion it was the activities of the latter group that succeeded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in introducing status offences, offences which were criminal only if committed by a child under the age of 14, e.g. children who frequented the company of reputed thieves (ibid).

Such laws were therefore designed to protect children as well as to control them, and in them can be seen the early embodiment of the care and control dilemma, a contradiction with which social workers still wrestle. There is thus a long history of state intervention into the care of children; though the motives are mixed depending on whether it is seen as for the sake of the child, the parent, society, or for what the child may grow up to become.

Today children's lives are seen to be immeasurably better. Not even the prevalence of repeated child abuse within the family disturbs the bland view of the generality of the benevolent experience of family life. Such incidents, it is believed, affect only the few and can be explained in such a manner that it leaves the quality of child care in the families of most of us unexamined and complacent.

Yet even in the 'non abusing' family there remains the same power and control exercised by the adult/parental world over children. As family life has become increasingly privatised, its members have been freely able to exercise a whole range of behaviours, away from public gaze. (1)

For example, Goffman writes of the non-person status of children in the family. He observes that children are talked past and about as if they were absent and that they are tormented, teased and made the target of attention. He notes that the time and the territory of the child is regarded as expendable, so that regardless of the child's own preoccupations at the time, it is thought acceptable for the child to be sent off on errands or to fetch something for the adult (Goffman 1976 p.4). Thus children are the servants of the adult world, for they act as carriers of parents' disappointments, hates, desires, aspirations and ambivalence.

And Greer compares the attitudes of the Western world to its children, to those societies where children are integrated. She comments that the gulf between the adult society and the world of children in the 'Anglo-Saxon' West is not universal. She has observed societies where adults and children laugh at the same jokes, where they share their evening meal with their children and where serious discussions are not avoided because of the presence of children (Greer 1984 p.4).

Thus the child's experience of family life has become increasingly individualised and marginalised. To whom should they protest? Children's stories are rarely heard. This is not to say there is any lack of interpretation by the adult world, but it appears in a censored and edited form. The adult perspective of childhood is a romance; childhood is seen as carefree, there is an exaggeration of the power of children, or children are seen as passive objects, the grateful recipients of adult generosity. Children have become truly objectified.

Lloyd de Mause comments after his studies of childhood accounts,

Masses of evidence are hidden, distorted, softened or ignored. The child's early years are played down, formal educational content is endlessly examined, emotional content is avoided by stressing child legislation and avoiding home.

(de Mause 1974 p.5)

Gathorne-Hardy also writes:

From the 14th century right up to the nineteenth century there appears to have been an almost complete, large scale

collective act of forgetfulness on the part of the British people about their infancy.

(Gathorne-Hardy, 1972 p. 33)

How can this be understood? In a study by the Swiss psychoanalyst, Alice Miller, she observes the "invisible walls" of society. These block off an awareness of the suffering of the humiliated and manipulated child. She notes the "boundless tolerance" that children have for their parents, and comments that the first two years of a child's life enables the parent to exercise enormous powers. The child

can be moulded, dominated, taught good habits, scolded and punished - without any repercussions for the person raising the child and without the child taking revenge. The child will overcome the serious consequences of the injustice he has suffered only if he succeeds in defending himself i.e. if he is allowed to express his pain and anger. If he is prevented from reacting in his own way because his parents cannot tolerate his reactions (crying, sadness, rage) and forbid them by means of looks or other pedagogical methods, then the child will learn to be silent.

(Miller 1983 p.6) (2)

It is this learning to be silent, to be passive and through this, forgetting and denying the emotional content of childhood, that I wish to consider and to explain. The aim is to sensitize the reader to the child's experience and in so doing to perhaps enable also the reader to recollect their own childhood.

### **The Child, the Parent and the Outside World**

This section examines, from within the autobiographies, how the parent represents the outside world to the child and how the child

experiences that. Understanding an experience means examining the words that were chosen and understanding how those words evoke an atmosphere, so I quote descriptions - of events and of the parent - and interpret particular images that seem to embody some essential aspect of a particular childhood. Hence the child's view of and relationship with the parent is fundamental in informing how childhood is experienced. Childhood memories depict an atmosphere, of warmth and cold, so the words used to describe this atmosphere may refer to temperatures and consequent images of intimacy or its lack. While reading this, I held in mind the theoretical section on alienation, for the earlier discussions on fragmentation, objectification and powerlessness, were useful in directing attention to certain experiences.

In the following six autobiographies, the writers focussed on, or at least chose to write about, three aspects of the parent's experience of the world outside the home. These were unemployment during the thirties; employment during the forties and fifties; and the effects of work on parental behaviour.

### **Unemployment**

In Chapter 4, I drew on Leonard's analysis of the effects of unemployment on personality. He pointed out that the unemployed are both marginal and subordinate to the larger social order, and that because of the importance of work under capitalism, the unemployed male feels guilty, lonely and worthless. They are

without status. This view was confirmed in Angela Rodaway's account.

Rodaway makes several points; how important it was for her father that no one knew he was unemployed; how being without work meant the family had to be ~~more~~ respectable, and how this struggle affected her mother. This also affected Angela's "sense of being", for in order to compensate for her parents' shame she struggled to escape. Hence she used education as a potential means to emancipate herself and her family. In this struggle she experienced both enlightenment and burden.

The first reference she makes to her father's unemployment is when she relates the time she was seen as a child pushing a barrow along the street. This was to make his private shame public, and was the event when she then also came to know her father's secret. She wrote,

He spent the whole of that evening telling me, in little bursts of anger, how coarse and common I had looked pushing a coster barrow along the road."

(Rodaway 1960 p.55)

Angela gradually came to realise that her offence was to expose to the world the reality of her family's circumstances, and that her father was unemployed. This was a "front" that both her parents worked at to maintain. The front was, in fact, a mystification, of the sort Laing and Estenson pointed to. For example,

Our 'superiority' was observed by many of our acquaintances in the intricate social hierarchy in which we lived. We were poor but we were very deserving.... Our 'superiority' demanded also, a way of living that was almost monastic in

its strictness. It was slovenly for instance to do the week's washing on any day of the week than Monday, snobbish to send it 'out'. It was slovenly to have the midday meal later than one o'clock and snobbish to call it anything but 'dinner'.

(Ibid p.23)

What was the effect of maintaining this "poor but deserving" image on her mother? She comments that her mother's chief characteristic was an unremitting, lifeless energy and that she had a thin mouth and fixed eyes, like dents in a tin. For Angela the worst part of unemployment was not unemployment in itself, but the shame of it; yet the shame she felt was the shame of her parents. What the child experienced was the parents' subjective response and interpretation of their objective circumstances. Her account demonstrates the interdependency between the management of this and the consequent development of identity. The subjective experience and understanding of the parent is a process of mediating the outside world for the child, for the parent initially defines the situation for the child.

However, the child also may exercise choice. They may accept or reject the parental definition and therefore formulate their own response. This acceptance or rejection presupposes a context in which negation is possible, which can, along with the child's consciousness of the situation, allow the process of transcendence. How then did Angela manage the similar experiences of poverty arising out of unemployment?

Angela took on for the family the responsibility for escaping the stigma of unemployment. She observed the affluent life style of the middle classes and saw that education could provide a way out. In this she was supported by her mother. She wrote,

All of these things belonged to a different life, one to which I might eventually aspire, provided I went the right way about it. There was only one way; I must work hard and get a scholarship.... But how we worked! My mother coached me at home in arithmetic and sent notes to school to ask if I might do extra sums during needlework, during parties, during games.

(Ibid p.57)

Nevertheless her appreciation of the potentially liberating force of education was expressed in the following,

Everyday life became richer. Learning new words was like a key to free the imprisoned thought I'd been unable to express.

(Ibid p.52)

### **Employment**

Yet even when a father is employed, life is not necessarily any easier for the child. Chodorow and Tolson in two quite separate approaches to understanding masculinity hypothesised how work might influence a man's behaviour at home. They both argued, one from a Marxist account, the other from a psychoanalytic perspective, the interdependency between the nature of control at work and how this affects the role of father/husband.

What was interesting in these autobiographical accounts was the depiction of two quite different experiences of employment: one



which confirmed Tolson's and Chodorow's approach, the other negating it. From this I saw that there is no necessary causal connection between work and home. What is equally important is how the parent defined, understood and evaluated their work and themselves. Hence I refer to Thomas and Thomas' concept of "the definition of the situation" (in Plummer 1983). Of course, this must be understood at the level of the individual, for Chodorow and Tolson are hypothesising a general state of affairs, a personality construct that one would expect to find under particular work processes within capitalism.

Hence Rob's account of his childhood is set in the South of England just after the War (De'ath 1966). His father was a naval officer, but after the war becomes the manager of a factory. There is an atmosphere of bleakness and isolation as he tells his story for his childhood represents a massive personal struggle to resist the ideological view of the world put forward by his father and passively supported by his mother. Rob's choice of language conceptualises his father not only personally but politically.

His father is "rigid", he gives "incessant orders", he has "his standards", his "inherited prejudices", and his "pathological book of rules". Yet because Rob's struggle is ultimately personal, and is not linked to any individual or group's struggle, Rob experiences the pain in isolation on his own as he is constantly humiliated. He feels "completely alone", and "they were all

against me". His description of his father is imbued with angry despair.

You could make a life size replica of him out of cuttings from the Daily Express. Well, I don't care; I don't have to listen to him shout any more; he is just as much a product of his parents, of his generation, as I am of mine. Underneath his pathological book of rules he's sensitive and intelligent. Only he didn't break out, he just bent beneath it. Maybe he had no chance.

(Ibid p.29)

There was no warmth, closeness or intimacy in Rob's relationship with his father.

No-one really knows or understands my father. I didn't know him when I was eleven and I don't know him now. He has no friends, because there is no way of getting close to him.

(Ibid p.13)

Yet this may be compared with Winifred Foley's experience. Her childhood was largely spent in poverty in the Forest of Dean, where her father was a coalminer. One would expect that coalmining would be brutalising in that there is danger, uncertainty and unremitting hard work. One would expect therefore that there would be a consequent effect on family life, but this was not the case. Her experience of childhood is sublime. She writes,

It was nice to be indoors, safe from the cold. There was always a good fire. Most likely, on the one side of it our mam would be asleep with the baby on her lap and on the other, old Great Aunt with whom we lived.

(Foley 1980 p.25)

And her observations of her father are similarly detailed and positive. She writes with love,

To us children, our dad was the fount of wisdom, kindness and honour. Whenever we wanted his attention he became a

child among us - slow, dreaming and always understanding ... Once, when I had earache in the small hours, he took me sobbing with pain, downstairs, he made up a good fire, warmed a brick in the oven to hold to my head to try and ease the pain, cuddled me on his lap and tried to distract me with his tales of Brer Rabbit.

(Ibid p.22)

## The war

The child's experience of war was written of in the context of their relationship with the parent. Two authors refer to this, Tom Wakefield, brought up in the forties in a West Midlands coalmining area, and May Hobbs, who writes of the same period but as an East End child. What is clear from the accounts is the evident unhappiness of the parent and how this is seen by the child. The child's internalisation of the parent's own unhappiness is doubly painful for the child: firstly on account of its emotional content and secondly because this feeds into how the adult behaves - as a parent.

So Tom's father who is a pigeon-fancier feels constrained to kill his beloved pigeons so that the pigeon-pens can make way for growing vegetables, as part of the war effort. Tom makes several observations. Firstly, he is never directly told why and what his father is doing. Secondly, he relates his sense of shock at seeing his father cry - "Men didn't cry" - and thirdly, that he colludes with his father's avoidance of pain. He writes,

All about his feet were birds. The blue, white, grey and pink bodies were inert except for an occasional bird that involuntarily twitched or shuddered after death, as though

it required one more flight.... Silent, bewildered, I waited. He lifted his head. Tears welled from his eyes and coursed his face. I was shocked, not by the carnage, not by the murder and slaughter, but by his tears. Men did not cry. My dad had never cried.

(Wakefield 1980 p.15)

Later he writes of how he coped with this. He says,

"Dad, dad, I won't tell anybody that I saw you crying."

"You didn't," he said. "It was feathers, feathers. It was just the feathers that got in me eyes."

(Ibid p.16)

His mother also has her own way of both venting her horror of the war, and at the same time punishing him. She uses atrocity war pictures to shock her son. Tom relates what she said:

"I'll show you some bloody pictures. Just sit where you are; don't leave or you'll get a crack on your head. There, stuff your eyes onto that lot and don't forget what you've seen. And if you have bad dreams, so much the better..."

(Ibid p.78)

May Hobbs' account of wartime childhood is of parental loss and of rejection. This permeates her experience of evacuation and heightens her sensitivity towards being marginal to family life. She begins her account by relating what it felt like to be an East Londoner living in the country, "a strange land" where she felt like a foreigner. She also explains her feelings about her natural parents and through her writing comes the confusion and disappointment with her parents. She writes,

Down in Somerset the kids from the East End were foreigners in a strange land. For a time I was billeted on a family, and the one thing you knew for certain was that the people you were evacuated to did not want you. You sussed they did not like you.

(Hobbs 1974 p.14)

May was excluded from her parent's love, and this is expressed in a metaphor -

She would only allow the front room to be used on special occasions. In fact us kids... were hardly ever let inside it

(Ibid, p. 16)

- as well as directly:

They told me at the home that my dad would be coming to collect me. Well by that stage I had completely forgotten what my mother and father looked like, or that I had one or the other. Neither one of them had been down to visit me in all that time.... I had never been sent so much as a Christmas or birthday card that might have helped me feel there was someone keeping in touch.

(Ibid p.15)

One of her few positive experiences with her father was subsequently to lead to her abandonment.

One day a storm blew up while "Uncle Ben" was there. At once I made a bolt for the stairs, but he made me go and sit with him up on the steps. He talked away, saying that it was only the clouds having a row with each other and that houses never collapsed. This helped me to grow less afraid of them. All of sudden though, 'Uncle Ben' stopped coming. He went away one day, saying he would see me again. I was fifteen years old before that happened.

(Ibid p.20)

This rejection and abandonment was to haunt May Hobbs for years. She struggled but failed to make sense of it, and eventually conceded the struggle with despair.

He and my mother could not have me back - could not have me or did not want me. Even after all these years I have never found out the exact reason, and I did not particularly care.

(Ibid p.20)

May Hobbs had to find a way of integrating the actual experience of her mother with the ideological statement of what a mother is

or should be. For example in the opening paragraphs of her autobiography she writes,

It did not matter, whether your mother was a brass, a roller, a hoister, or a charlady. She held the family together. That was how important the mother was in that society.

(Ibid Foreward)

Later she became aware of the contradiction between that and her experience. To make sense of it, she makes a distinction between "a real mother" and a biological mother. She writes,

To say I hated her might seem to contradict what I say about mothers in the Foreward, but then I had never known her as a real mother."

(Ibid p.30)

### **Gender and sexuality**

Gender and sexuality are related to each other. In the section on inter-family relationships from the psychoanalytic perspective I outlined how boys come to identify with the father, and how girls identify with the mother. I pointed out that feminist psychoanalytic literature observes that women's psychology is constructed through a deprivation of care, since typically mothers mother their sons but constrain and control their daughters. Hence women turn for parenting to the father/husband, while the male in his turn, fearing the intimacy and closeness of the female, is constrained to reject this in order to be more like not-mother, his father.

This struggle is first experienced within the family, but the identification with the same sex parent also orientates one's understanding of sexuality. The work of Brownmiller and Dworkin demonstrated how the struggle between the sexes also informed how each gender perceived not only their own sexuality but their orientation to the other.

In these autobiographical accounts of childhood, children learnt about gender conformity and sexuality, not only from their parents' responses, but also within their play and from the attitude of those outside the family who reinforced or negated parental attitudes. Yet learning about sex seemed a quite different experience for boys and girls, although it was play that seemed the main source of information for both.

#### **Learning about sex through play**

In these accounts it was quite striking that the three male authors all depicted themselves as active explorers of the young female body. The female was, in contrast to this, apparently passive. Tom Wakefield writes,

On a Wednesday from 5 pm until 6 pm we played doctors and nurses down there. This was the most popular day of all and sometimes we earned as much as 9d. At such times, the shelter (which we converted to the hospital for that period) was full. My eldest cousin - he was very old, twelve I think - was the doctor in charge - all our ailments and troubles stemmed from the belly downwards. Some of the girls had chest complaints, but even they mostly had stomach problems. So usually they had to take their knickers off and lift their frocks up when they lay on the bunk. We

looked and we touched, it didn't matter if it was a girl or a boy.

(Wakefield 1980 p.23)

Laurie Lee, who was the child of a single parent and spent his childhood in a Cotswold village, described a similar incident. Once more playing the role of doctor, he writes,

Without a blink or a word Jo lay down on the grass and gazed up at the red-berried yews, stretched herself subtly on her green crushed bed, and scratched her calf, and waited. The game was formal and grave in character, its ritual rigidly patterned. Silent as she lay, my hands moved on silently, and even the birds stopped singing."

(Lee 1963 p.204)

Girls also seemed willing to remove their clothes for Rob and his friends.

They'd do anything that we told them, if nobody was looking, and that was easy enough to arrange where we lived.... Once, they both took all their clothes off, left them under a tree and ran right up to us. I was curious but not really excited. Then they were off again, came back with their clothes on and said they would see us again tomorrow.

(De'ath 1966 p.24)

Yet in the three girls' autobiographies, there is silence surrounding the development of their sexuality, as understood for themselves. Their account shows no parallel interest in boys' bodies, but rather a concern with and sensitivity to, maintaining a particular moral order. Furthermore sex is seen as related to babies, an association that none of the boys made. May Hobbs writes,

It was thought a dreadful sin to have a baby before you were married. If it did happen, they would get you married double fast, whether you wanted to or not.

(Hobbs 1974 p.5)

And Foley observes,



If I had any curiosity about it, I expect it was damped by the taboo nature of the subject. Up to the age of eleven to twelve, waist to knee was unmentionable, later than that, it was neck to knees.

(Foley 1980 p.114)

Angela Rodaway has a greater openness towards her own sexuality, though in her particular case this develops out of a consciousness of disappointment in her mother. She writes of her ill informed ideas about menstruation and that her understanding was imbued with myths and taboos; that she should not go swimming, eat ice cream, wash in cold water, do gym and have a bath. When she starts menstruating, she says she thought "she would die". She felt she could not confide in her mother, and when her mother discovers her daughter's growing maturity, she repeats to her daughter the myths and taboos. Angela writes,

... it struck me suddenly that she knew nothing at all of our school life, or conversations or our interests... and any respect that I had for her vanished as did my confidence in her.

(Rodway 1960 p.78)

For Angela, her mother's failure to supply her with a needed closeness and understanding, meant she built other, more important relationships outside the family. Her friend Sonia in particular taught her an awareness of her own sexuality. She describes climbing ropes in the gym,

Having climbed, we were supposed to come down hand over hand, the only part of our bodies in contact with the rope being our hands and feet and our knees. This did not always happen as planned. Sonia coming down experienced a sensation which she found suddenly and alarmingly pleasurable. She told me about it but I did not understand.

(Ibid p.70)

Sonia helped her understand. Together they shop for rope.

The shop assistant was a brusque and efficient man. He listened carefully to Sonia's description and then asked what she wanted it for. She said skipping. He was incredulous. How could we skip with rope an inch in diameter?

(Ibid p.71)

Hence boys' and girls' experiences were quite different. Boys were apparently more active and used girls for their purposes. Girls on the other hand seemed constrained by taboos, not to talk about babies, their bodies and menstruation. Their information came via accident or via their friends. In these experiences there did, therefore, seem a reproduction at an early stage of the typical gender relations that feminists have observed: girls were passive and controlled and boys were active and apparently intrusive in relationship to girls.

#### **Learning about gender through identification**

As well as the examples of learning about sexual difficulties and sexuality, there were those activities which children shared as part of the adult world. These shared activities are particularly important to consider because as previously discussed they are a way whereby children identify with their parents. By participating with an adult they learn appropriate gender behaviour; that considered relevant for the child's age, sex and class. For example, girls shopped with their mother or prepared food with them, or looked after their younger brothers and sisters, as Rodaway relates:

The proudest times of my life were the hours I spent wheeling the pram up and down the street and wearing my new

school hat. Old ladies who lived along the better side of Arundel Square, used to stop me and say what a good girl I was to look after the babies and what a clever girl I was to have got a scholarship.

(Rodaway 1960 p.67)

Tom Wakefield refers to his father talking to him as if "I were an adult" which while pleasing him, helped formulate what he called a "self-precociousness". He refers also to going to the pub with his parents, and noting that the men talked to the men and the women talked to the women (Wakefield 1980 p.57).

May Hobbs notes the differential expectation applied to girls and observes its crushing potential. She writes with anger and resistance.

Because you are born a girl you have to be indoctrinated into accepting that you are not worth the time and expense of being trained.... No thought is given to how this squanders all sorts of ability that could be useful to society, and the way it stops women leading more satisfying lives on a personal level.

(Hobbs 1974 p.28)

Elsewhere, writing as a union militant (3) she makes a direct connection between her understanding of the attitudes of the union bosses and the way she was treated by her parents as a child. She comments,

The attitude seems like the one the trade unions take towards the office cleaners - not worth the time or effort.

(Ibid p.15)

## The Child's Experience of Pain

In this section I want to explore how the child experiences pain, whether that be emotional or physical, and how that relates to their relationship with the parent. My explanation of this led to a different understanding of abuse, one broader than that used by organisations whereby definitions are seen merely as guides for identification. What follows, therefore, is also an elaboration of the points made in the section on mystification in family life and how parental power, represented as benevolence and care, may in fact come to conceal the origins of the child's distress and disturbance. It is an account of pain as expressed by the child, but considers also how the child may oppose and resist parental exploitation.

There were extensive references to the child's experiences of pain throughout four of the autobiographies. The only exceptions were those written by Laurie Lee and Winifred Foley. Pain was experienced in a variety of ways, but was quite clearly far more than physical. Parents had a whole range of techniques and approaches to the child, which, whether they intended it or not, had the effect of hurting the child. I have classified the experiences of pain as arising from: the parent's need for the child to conform; creating an atmosphere of abuse; manipulating the child; and treating the child as an object.

Although these are not mutually exclusive, they are ways in which the adult world may relate to the child. In them can be seen indications of typical gender behaviour, the father as angry and potentially violent, mystification in confusing the source of anger, and objectification, in treating the child as if he or she has no feelings or thoughts. It is such ways of being that become woven into the fabric of childhood experience, and create the intangible atmosphere of abuse in the everyday.

#### The parent's need for the child to conform

Rob writes,

He treated me as though he wanted me to conform exactly to his way of life and have no experience of judgement of my own. He imposed so many restrictions on me that I had no freedom at all.... Whenever I spoke my father would either jeer at what I said or order me to keep quiet. Meals were always eaten in stoney silence. Antagonism turned into hatred.

(Ibid p.42)

Elsewhere he states,

....his whole attitude, the atmosphere at home, and his incessant orders drove me away from whatever standards he had. He ran our home as if it were a ship, still fighting the war. Trousers are always regular grey; hair never touching the ears, school uniform to be worn at all times, don't speak with your mouth full; speak only when you're spoken to.

(Ibid p.29)

## Creating an atmosphere of abuse

Children were alive to the atmosphere within the home. One way of punishing a child is to remain silent, which when coupled with a readiness on the parent's part to assault the child, makes for a constant state of anxiety and tension. The child waits apprehensively for the next outburst. Intimidation may also be experienced if the parent sadistically appears ready to hit the child. Rob again draws attention to this:

What was worse was the atmosphere. The tension in my home became unbearable to me. My father is a very controlled person and the tension never let up. Before I left home I used to cringe when he came near me and he would taunt me with having a guilty conscience. It was this atmosphere which made me keep to my room or go out whenever possible. I can remember it well enough to make me hate him, but it doesn't matter now.

(Ibid p.113)

It is this atmosphere of abuse that is difficult to understand.

Rob struggled to explain,

Anyway, actual physical violence is easy to understand. At least it's something you can see....'the other side' of the story could be told and no doubt, if it was told convincingly, my part of the story would fall apart under brute reason.

(Ibid p.113)

By "brute reason" Rob was referring to his father's account. At the same time it is evident he lacked a consciousness or a sureness that what he was experiencing was abuse. This abuse had permeated into the atmosphere of the family, and Rob lived in dread of it.

Tom Wakefield's experience of abuse was, like Rob's, partially to do with an atmosphere of coldness or intimidation. In his case it was his mother. He writes,

There were long days of silence from her, days when she raged without cause and days when she would sulk and withdraw from us. I found both facts, the silences and the nagging, equally difficult to contend with.

(Ibid p.44)

Tom's mother is clearly deeply unfulfilled and troubled, though we are given no indication as to its source. But her response to him is punitive and destructive. For example, on one occasion she incites his father to hit him.

"Hit him, go on give him the strap. Take your belt off to him." My mother had already attacked me with the cane across my legs and behind. I hadn't cried. She had found this unpalatable.... Silent and terrified, I had endured her anger.

(Ibid p.43)

Sadly, the child's defence of enduring only provoked his mother to more, what she regarded as legitimate punishment. They both become engaged in a battle of wills, with his mother becoming more determined by the child's resistance to "break the child's will".

### **Manipulating the child**

The atmosphere of abuse may also be imbued with manipulation. The child becomes confused as to what the parent wants. Hence the parent manipulates an event in such a way that it is unclear as to the source of their anger. Rob relates one such incident:

On the morning of my fourteenth birthday he left a pound note on the kitchen table, I wasn't sure whether it was meant for me or not. I was about to leave for school when

he called me back and asked me why I hadn't thanked him. Without a chance to explain, I was sent spinning across the room. (4)

(Ibid p.42)

### Treating the child as an object

The parent may also use the child for their own purposes. There were several examples of this, the parent treating the child as if they were a piece of property, an object, which had no needs, desires or aims different from the parent. The child might also be used to vent parental anger or irritation. A particularly clear example is that given by May Hobbs:

Shortly after I left school, Lil, my real mother, decided she wanted me back. I had to go, because as the law stood she was my natural mother. Unlike the law, I am on the side of the child in all such cases, and always will be. When a child has been brought up by foster parents, who have given it the love it needs, washed its nappies, seen it through its measles and teething troubles, I ask what sort of law it is that supports the "natural mother" coming along after years of silence and saying 'Ta very much, I'll have it back now', as if the child was a parcel that had been minded.

(Ibid p.29)

May Hobbs returned to her mother, to find she was treated as an "unpaid servant, a real skivvy".

The day started with me being pulled out of bed at six o'clock to light the fire, make the tea, get the breakfast and clean up before any of the others got out of bed at seven thirty. God help me if I didn't finish it all. In she would come, raving, shouting and using her hands.

(Ibid p.30)

May began to resist. She ran away but the police returned her home. She describes the scene.



When we got home they were all screaming and hollering as per usual. All the hate I felt just came welling up in a great rush and I lashed out at Lil, telling her I wished she was dead. On the Saturday morning they tried to get me out of bed, but I wouldn't shift. I said to Lil that I'd been at work all week, the same as she had, and she'd better get used to doing things for herself from now on.

(Hobbs p.32)

This was one example of how a child resisted. How did others? A variety of resistances and oppositions were written of. Children phantasised, ran away, called "the Welfare", kept a secret not known to the adult world, created strong friendships, all of which constructed a counter-world where they had control over particular parts of their lives.

#### **Resistances and oppositions**

How do children survive such experiences? Rob developed a variety of techniques that enabled him to preserve some continuing semblance of self. Privately he fantasised that he would kill his father. He kept a diary in which he did "all kinds of unimaginable things to him". He spent a lot of time with his grandparents, especially his grandfather. They would walk for miles over fields and through woods. He visited a jazz club with his friends, and at fourteen he was the youngest of them all. Meanwhile, within the family he sought to distance himself both emotionally and physically from his father.

As far as possible I stopped myself from being a part of the family, avoided my father and wished desperately that I could live somewhere else.

(De'ath 1966 p.43)

His mother also sought a solution. She visits the "local welfare officer" and told him that she was unable to stand any longer the continual petty rows between her son and his father. From there Rob is sent to a hostel. This is a positive experience for Rob and Rob finds it preferable to being at home. He said,

I felt much happier there during the six months before I finally left school. The emphasis on behaviour and haircuts was still there but it was not so heavily imposed....I was free of the kind of restrictions my father had insisted on. I was given money to buy my own clothes, was allowed out every night, and was never compelled to have my hair cut.

(Ibid p.48)

Tom, like Rob, manages his pain by phantasising. He imagines he is a dog, capable of biting her ankle, that he could dart out and bite her. He also makes friends with Claudio, an Italian POW to whom he makes regular visits and gives presents of cigarettes and chocolates through the high wire fence. In exchange Claudio gives him gifts.

It is evident children use a number of ways to manage parental abuse and oppression. They may struggle to develop a psychic and physical space, or may together with others, form what could be called the community of children. This enables them to develop a sense of childhood, separate and opposed to the controls of the adult world. Children's play is their work, for its importance lies in their maintaining some management of their lives. Notions

of the natural world, the family and the adult world, become incorporated into a system of meanings and create boundaries of control and authority both within the child and between the child and the outside world. Play enables the child to communicate their feelings and thoughts as well as developing control over new experiences and the environment.

Play may be benign and strongly related to the natural world, as for the country child. For example, Foley's Forest of Dean childhood provided an abundance of a rich source of play materials. The bladder of a killed pig could be inflated and kicked around like a football. The flowers of foxgloves could be pressed between the fingers so the air was trapped and the flower would explode with a pop. She writes,

[I]n the long, hot days of August, we made cool tents from damp green ferns that grew thick among the oak trees, or played helter-skelter down the slopes on old sacks.

(Foley 1980 p.16)

Or it may be more confrontationist as May Hobbs' experience of a city childhood relates. Writing of the immediate post war period, she remembers the bomb sites, where children could run wild and get as dirty as they liked. She writes of a community of children, where a "night out" for the Hoxton children would be as many as sixteen children would walk down to Holborn and back, so that Sid or whoever, could see his Probation Officer. Children in the city could also use the proximity of terrace houses to tease the adult occupants. Playing "Knock down Ginger" meant,

We would creep along a street tying pieces of cotton to all the door knockers. Then everybody would get well across the

other side of the road, and at a given signal, all would pull at the same time. What a racket that made....we would run and hide and watch the people coming to their doors, threatening to kill the little bastards as soon as they got their hands on them.

(Hobbs 1974 p.21)

For Rob opposition to the adult world meant climbing over the wall into the graveyard, which was "strictly forbidden". He made friends with those his father considered "dirty" or badly behaved and spent a lot of time climbing and playing in the new houses that were being built in the area.

Children might also develop a psychic space for themselves, by the development of secrets. The idea of a secret means for the child that they have control over information and may decide at what point a secret may be shared. Sharing secrets is learning to develop strategies of maintaining distance. Protecting a physical space and seeing it as a secret, enables the child to construct a boundary between self and a social identity as constructed by the adult world. It also represents a defence against the adult world's belief in their rightness to intrude into the child's private life. Thus distance, intrusiveness, making space and sharing develop in relation to each other. In the context of a secret, they enable the child to develop a sense of identity through the separateness.

For example, Winifred Foley writes of her freedom in "the privy" which becomes her "seat of learning", which she used for long sessions of undisturbed reading. She also refers to a narrow

space between the shed in her garden and the stone wall of next door's garden.

There I played whenever I could. Only my little brother, baby sister and my best friend, Gladys, were allowed to come without special permission.

(Foley 1980 p.95)

And Laurie Lee, also has a special play area, an abandoned cottage,

To this silent, birdless, sunless shambles, we returned again and again. We could do what we liked here, wreak what damage we wished, strangely enough no-one disturbed us.

(Lee 1963 p.34)

Angela Rodaway's secret was an old cooking range,

The most fascinating place in the whole house. It was concealed by a purple curtain which added to its mystery.... The oven was a repository for our darkest, deepest, secret treasures and everything, not in this world, was up the chimney.

(rodaway 1960 p.65)

And Rob's experience of physical and emotional abuse led him to reflect on the nature of corporal punishment and its relationship to attitudes within society. In a thoughtful and extended critique, he comments

It's not difficult to criticise some of the more unhealthy aspects of corporal punishment. In most cases where 'discipline' is being applied to make you know 'what's right and what's wrong' the person who is being punished is the least likely to benefit from it. Often it is a simple way of relieving guilt, if you have any, and I think, most recipients of regular corporal punishment actually want it, particularly if they are disturbed or delinquent.... I think the authoritarian mind has more effect than hurting a few delinquents. I don't blame the last generation for its attitudes; they were brought up in the midst of 'might is right' and most people want what they think is best for the children. People make decisions on the information offered to them. The public doesn't really know what's going on; either that or the information has been deliberately withheld. Public atmosphere still isn't very enlightened.

There are two types of father - if you believe in extremes; there are those who tell you what to do, or else - there are the ones who explain, talk and think.

(De'ath 1966 p.114)

## Summary and Discussion

The six autobiographical accounts considered here have covered a variety of childhoods; encompassing urban, rural, gender and class differences. They are ultimately "ordinary" for as Rob writes, "If anything, my experiences are significant for their absolute ordinariness. I can't pull feelings out of my childhood that somebody else didn't claim". A consideration of these childhoods is part of the process in developing an understanding of the quality of their experience. In this there is partially a phenomenological methodology to my ordering and categorising, so as my knowledge deepens both in the sense of information and awareness, a more sensitive and informed conceptual framework becomes possible.

We have seen that children are not merely victims or objects of parental abuse and exploitation. In their play, their alliances with other children and in their secrets, they can struggle and resist, and therefore manage their world. Children have been shown as exuberant, angry and sad and as sharp observers of the adult world. They share a common history and partially oppose and

resist the adult world by their community, the community of children.

The community of children exists outside the family and maintains distance. It serves to resist the intrusions and the control of children by the adult world. Children also develop secrets. The idea of a secret means to a child that they have control over information, and can decide at what point a secret may be shared.

Within the child-parental relationship this may however lead to a further escalation of control and intrusion. Parents may feel they have a right to know children's secrets. This right may be expressed by reading a child's letters (Rodaway 1960 p.78), diaries (De'ath 1966 p.42), or may take the form of such gross psychic intrusion that the child finds it difficult to develop a sense of self. This is expressed by parental insistence on choosing a child's clothes, their hairstyle or their friends. Enduring punishment may also lead to a further escalation of assault on the child ( Wakefield). The child's will, it seems, must be broken. The child must be subjected to the parent.

In this the privatised family becomes as if a "total institution". In "Asylums" Goffman identifies a total institution as comprising four features. Firstly, all aspects of life (sleeping, playing and working) take place in the same space and under the same authority. Secondly, each member is ostensibly treated alike and required to do the same thing. Thirdly, daily life is tightly

scheduled, and fourthly, there is an imposition of formal rules which are controlled by a body of officials (Goffman 1971 p.17). It requires little imagination to recognise the similarity between the model and the internal organisation of some families.

Understanding the family in this way enables us to conceptualise this particular form of parent-child interaction as between the powerful and the powerless. In Goffman's discussion of patient resistance within asylums, he identifies a process which he calls "looping". He comments,

....an agency that creates a defensive response on the part of the inmate takes this very response as the target of its next attack. The individual finds that his protective response to an assault upon self is collapsed into the situation, he cannot defend himself in the usual way by establishing distance between the mortifying situation and himself.

(Goffman 1971 p.41)

So that the outside world is unaware of this "looping", the family, as a privatised institution, develops a "front". A respectable and acceptable face is presented to the world. Such "fronts" are attempts at mystification. They conceal the contradiction between how parents present themselves to the outside world and how they behave within the family. Angela Rodaway's account was the best example of this.

Furthermore there is no necessary causal relationship between poverty and the ways in which children were cared for in the family. The bleak, childhood experience of Rob took place in a materially satisfactory environment. Rob's account of his father



shows him as representing a particularly repressive, rigid and authoritarian view of society and of people's place within it. The most integrated childhoods of Laurie Lee and Winifred Foley, seen in terms of warmth, love and security and feeling close to their immediate environment and the natural world, occurred within the most materially deprived families.

How can this be understood? Is it possible that the "parental definition of the situation" is as important and sometimes more important than the overall objective and material milieux. This is not to deny the importance of the material milieux but rather I am drawing attention also to the subjective meaning given to existence. There appears in any one situation a complex relationship between these two modes of being.

In effect, when seen from the perspective of the child, parental "definitions of the situation" represent ideological statements of a personal and political nature. It is therefore immaterial (sic) whatever the objective circumstances are. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Thomas and Thomas; cited in Denzin, 1978 p. 216). Thus definitions of the situation as experienced by the child, are statements of control. They control children through maintaining a particular social order. This order confirms to acceptable notions of class, gender and age behaviour, but they are not invariably hegemonic.

What is also evident from the autobiographical accounts is how commonplace is the exploitation and mistreatment of children. Four of the children experienced in some degree pain and hurt that was intrinsic to their relationship with the parent. Two of them, May Hobbs and Rob, had childhoods that could be seen as defined by an abusing relationship with a parent. The remaining two, Angela Rodaway and Tom Wakefield, had mixed experiences in that the other parent provided a balance, or alternatively the abusing parent could show some kindness at different times. What comes across is, however, the relative powerlessness of such children to change their circumstances. They suffered alone or at least could only share their experiences with other children.

This seems to me to expose the inadequacy of using organisational definitions of abuse. As I discussed in Chapter 5, definitions are ultimately ideological constructs, so in the case of child abuse, definitions are used to 'diagnose' whether or not child abuse has taken place. Used in this way they are based on a medical model, for one looks for signs which are understood as symptomatic of abuse. Abuse becomes 'factual' since it arises out of an event or a series of events. However, in viewing abuse in this way, other ways of perceiving it are avoided. Such definitions also presuppose that an external agent, outside the family, has the knowledge or the expertise to recognise abuse. Yet as I have discussed, the recognition of abuse is problematic, not only because abuse may be explained as legitimate punishment,

but also because it is simply not seen to be violent or abusive. This is at the heart of mystification.

An understanding of abuse needs to take into account the power differential between the parent and the child and also acknowledge that pain is more than physical. By defining abuse in too narrow a way, its political and social significance is thus obscured. I therefore propose an alternative understanding of abuse which can incorporate the child's experience. Thus, I use the term abuse in the sense of it being the experience of hurt and pain, either emotional or physical, which takes place in a relationship based on the parental domination, control and exploitation of the child.

Hence the power to define what is abuse is switched from the adult world, the parent or the expert, to the child. This has certain implications in that the child's perception is now validated, and there is a move from a position of subordinacy to one of equality. Secondly, this definition or understanding of abuse explicitly incorporates the generational inequality between parent and child. Since abuse can only take place within a relationship of domination, this definition recognises it.

It is, however, for precisely these same reasons that such a definition would be unacceptable for organisational use. Within the social order as now constructed, the child remains subordinated and reality is only legitimated when linked to the material or the 'objective'. Experience based on subjective

accounts are thus invalidated as being individualised expressions, and therefore of little consequence. It is not recognised that within the particular can be found the social, or as Marx put it, there is the "individualised communal being". But once such a view is rejected, as in the case of the organisational definition of abuse, an alternative and a political analysis may develop, as the following chapter illustrates.

## CHAPTER 6 - NOTES

1. I discuss the privatisation of the family more fully in Chapter 4, where I argue it can be understood as a manifestation of alienation.
2. Her observations are strikingly similar to Bowlby's thesis in "On knowing what you are not supposed to know and feeling what you are not supposed to feel" (1979).
3. May Hobbs made headlines in the 70s as an East End cleaner, for her role in leading the largely female night cleaners' strike at the Ministry of Defence. The struggle was on two fronts: firstly for union recognition and secondly for better pay and conditions.
4. Such incidents are similar to accounts of women's experiences of domestic violence as discussed by the Dobashes (1979).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LISTENING TO CHILDREN AND RENDERING THEIR ACCOUNT

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses children's views of family life, firstly in terms of their conceptualisation and evaluation of the family and whether they saw any alternative to living in the family. Secondly, in terms of how they perceived the relationship between themselves and the parent, and how this was influenced by gender. And thirdly, in terms of the child's conceptualisation and evaluation of abuse. This leads in the final section to a discussion of the relationship between abuse and punishment.

My understanding of abuse is as discussed in the previous chapter. That is, it is based on the child's perception of the experience of physical and/or emotional pain; and . is seen to occur within the context of a hierarchical power relationship between parent and child. This raises the issue of my acceptance of the child's view. Could it be that the child was exaggerating, mistaken or even lying about their experience? How much validity does a child's account have?

Earlier, in Chapter 3, I pointed to a fundamental premise within qualitative sociology, that is, that in order to understand, one takes the perspective of the researched. This approach to understanding the other, is also fundamental to Weber's interpretative sociology. Weber distinguished between two kinds of interpretative meaning, one kind being "direct understanding" whereby action is understood through direct observation, and the other, "explanatory understanding", where meaning is not immediately apparent to the researcher, and can only be understood in relationship to the actor's world (Eldridge 1972 p. 28). It is this latter understanding that is of importance here.

Thus it is really irrelevant whether the child exaggerated etc, for what is important is whether their view makes sense in the context of their lives and their experience. But accepting the viewpoint of the other is, however, only the first stage in the process of this research. For the child's interpretation then has to be subjected to a critical analysis. This is not to check out whether it is 'true', but whether there may be other interpretations that may be in line with what is 'objectively' known. That is to say, to situate the interpretation within the context of my theoretical discussion, to explore, as Horkheimer wrote, the universal within the particular (cited in Jay 1973 p.241). But this will be the subject of the next chapter; here I concentrate on the child's view.

The following is therefore based on group and individual interviews, although the latter were far more successful in terms of the research problematic. I discuss the possible reasons for this subsequently.

The first part of this chapter deals with the group interviews and gives an account of different ways of encouraging children to talk of their experiences within the family.

The second part is an account of the individual interviews, and as with the children in groups, focuses on three aspects earlier identified: family life, gender and identity, and their experience of abuse.

### **Interviewing Children in Groups**

In Chapter 3, I described how I chose and gained access to children in schools. This section focuses on the content of what was said to me by these children. As I earlier explained, I used three methods to encourage them to talk: life stories, free association and 'reading' photographs. These were simply different ways for communicating and were based on the assumption that children would be attracted to one approach rather than the other.



Apart from this I was interested in exploring through the use of different methods, their understanding of different facets of their lives. Hence the life story was, as the name suggests, a way of exploring their biographies, free association a means of investigating, in a spontaneous way, ideas of gender, and 'reading' photographs of the family, their perceptions.

### **The life stories**

I began by saying who I was and that I was interested in learning about them and their lives. To show them how, I began with an edited version of my own life story which I drew in cartoon form on a large sheet of white paper. I used different colours, and I asked them to do the same.

In terms of my research interests I found that the life stories revealed very little. There was one exception, that of one child who drew in careful detail a row between his father and mother. The faced stared from the paper, threatening, angry and triumphant. His parents were drawn as if automatons, their limbs stiff and held well away from their bodies. His mother was hitting his father over the head with a broom. The child told me that he could not stop thinking about it.

Unfortunately, as a technique to aid communication, it was not successful. The children were tentative, constantly asked me what they should put, checked with each other, and on occasions became

competitive about their drawing. They had to be guided and advised throughout the session. They clearly found it strange and were suspicious, even though I had explained to them that I wanted to know about their background history. Even more important, however, was the public nature of the exercise. Children became self-conscious; one girl whispered to me that her parents were divorced but that she didn't want to put this down. It was clear that children were reticent about the public nature of the task (the paper was large) and so they were reluctant to be open.

#### Free association - gender

This task proved much more successful in the group. It was particularly useful since the children called out in an impersonal way their personal reactions. I wanted to see what views of gender boys and girls held, since as I argued in Chapter 4, an adherence to typical gender behaviour influences the quality of interpersonal relationships within the family. This applies to male and female partners but also has a consequential effect on the care of the child.

I asked the boys what being a boy meant to them. They replied,

You mustn't do this and you mustn't do that.

You don't have to work at home, like girls.

You're in danger of being run down and kidnapped.

You can get drunk.

You have to control yourself.

You can rape people (sic).

You can ride motorbikes, you can do body-building.

Boys are strong and climbers.

Boys can't get raped.

Boys can be dads and protect the family.

Boys pay for girls.

Men can criticise women's clothing, their driving and women.

They can get drunk and take it out on their wives.

Boys riot and they shout.

I asked them what being a girl meant to them.

You can get raped.

Old ladies can get mugged.

You can wear better clothes.

If you're a girl, you don't have guns. Guns shoot women.

Girls are scared.

Girls are posh.

You have the pain of having kids.

I asked girls what being a girl meant to them.

You can wear boys' and girls' clothes.

You can have babies.

Girls want babies (sic).

Girls can be tomboys.

Boys are stupid playing girls' games.

Girls can wear make-up and nice earrings, they get more attention.

They have to be in earlier.

You have to help your mum.

Boys are lazy in the home.

I asked girls what being a boy meant to them.

Boys are bullies.

They don't do what they're told.

They think they're tough.

They always make excuses and then get in lots of fights.

They pick on girls and get in trouble with the police and think they can get away with it.

#### **Comment**

It was clear that as young as the children were (10-11 years), they held, in an explicit way, stereotypical gender beliefs.

Boys saw themselves as powerful; they used words like "being able to rape", strength, body-building, being able to criticise, being able to get drunk, being able to take this out on their wives, being able to riot and shout. They saw girls as decorative, being vulnerable, they could get shot, raped, they were scared.

Girls saw themselves as decorative, wanting and having babies, and receiving attention. They were more critical of boys than boys were of girls. They saw boys as bullies, as thinking themselves tough and getting into trouble, and getting away with it.

In Chapter 4, I discussed attributes of stereotypical gender behaviour. In the comments of these children, it is possible to see beliefs that conformed to typical models of masculine and feminine behaviour. Whether holding such attitudes actually informs behaviour is an issue that would need researching. Assuming this is a possibility, it is of concern that boys were so aware of their strength which they perceived could be used in a destructive way, at the same time as seeing girls as vulnerable and powerless.

#### **Punishment and abuse**

I also asked the two groups to talk about why they were punished in the family, and what they did about it. There were similarities in their responses. They spoke of getting smacked, getting hit, getting butted, getting shouted at, being kept in, getting a whack round the face. Punishment was, it was quite clear, very common and it was given for swearing, shouting, not listening, bringing dirt into the house. Children's perceptions of punishment were therefore linked to them not having done something. They clearly saw it as being part of parental control and discipline, and were not overly critical. It seemed to me

they saw it as an acceptable form of behaviour, and that it was understandable given a context, of not conforming to parental expectations.

I asked the children what they did when they were punished. They spoke of going out on their bikes, "making rude signs behind my mum's back", and one child who was locked into his bedroom said that he'd kicked the floor and the door until let out. Only one child seemed critical of physical punishment. She say, "My dad says you shouldn't get hit, but sometimes you get hit and they shouldn't have done that."

#### **Reading photographs - thoughts on the family**

There were two categories of response to the series of photographs I showed. Firstly it was evident that children linked family life with physical surroundings. They were sensitive to the environment and to any sign of poverty. Even their own locality was deprived in terms of lack of facilities and in being run down; it seemed to indicate a heightened awareness of this. This was also linked with anger, as the following demonstrates.

(Picture of a slum with children playing in the foreground)

Look at the peeling wallpaper. The council won't give them another flat.

They haven't got decent clothes.

They should pour petrol on it and then burn it down.

They should throw bricks at it.

That house is a dump.

(Picture of a couple rowing with two children watching)

They've got too many children.

They're having a row. They both want the child.

The child wants them to say something.

She's unhappy because she's been hit.

Her mum and dad are rowing. I don't like seeing mums and dads having a row.

He's got a horrible smile on his face. She's closing her eyes like that.

She's sitting down and watching him, with a horrible face.

The second category was comprised of references to mood and atmosphere. Children were attentive to inter-family behaviour and made interpretations as to what they thought was going on, as these comments show:

(Various pictures showing groups of adults and children together, but not fighting)

I like this one, because they're more like a family and they're happy.

They're going to the park to get some peace and quiet, 'cos their mum and dad are fighting.

I like this one and this one, because he's wearing decent clothes and he's taking care of him.

Looks like a happy family.

## Assessing the work with children in groups

My aim in talking to children in groups was to explore their views of family life, of self and gender and of abuse and punishment. This was most successful in relationship to their expressed views on gender. Children had by the age of eleven developed a view of themselves and of the opposite sex, which conformed to much writing on gender stereotyping. There seemed little ambiguity in their expressions of gender self, and neither did they express any ambivalence to it. Boys were well aware of their power and of their violence. Whether they would ever use it is another matter. Girls were similarly unaware of their lack of power and of any structural inequality.

This raises the question of the influence, or lack of influence, of the women's movement, for the head and the staff of this school were well aware of the permeation of sexism and racism and raised this as an issue with the children. Yet there was little awareness of this in the children. This clearly points to the 'undue influence' of the family for children of that age.

Similarly all the children were familiar with physical punishment. They also accepted it, with the exception of the one girl whose parent was ambivalent in the use of this.

The least satisfactory aspect of this group work arose out of the explanations of family life. I had attempted to reach some



understanding of children's views of the family by the use of the life stories and the photographs, yet as mentioned before I felt that the public nature of this work was in effect inhibiting. Whereas the other issues had provoked a free ranging discussion, I saw that the children were tending to monitor more closely my own input. They therefore took guidance from me, which I felt constrained their own experience.

It is possible that this may be understood by what I call 'the privacy control' mechanism, and in this there seemed echoes in my later struggle over access. To talk of family life in a free and easy way, in a potentially critical way, is quite simply to break a social convention. Because of this I decided not to proceed with the individual interviews, since I felt that I would be subjecting the children to an intrusion. The group work had defined a particular way of working. I was also aware that some children were a richer source of information than others, were more open and articulate, and it simply wouldn't be possible to seek them out to the exclusion of others. On the other hand it would also have been mechanical and possible embarrassing to interview them all, for the sake of appearances. I therefore thanked them for their participation and told them I would now be interviewing other children.

### **The Individual Interviews and the Problem of Access: Protection or Paternalism?**

In Chapter 3, I wrote of the problems in gaining access to talk with children. Because the reaction of the adult world to my request seemed so suspicious and guarded, it seemed to me that I was confronting a taboo. This taboo was to do with talking to children about their experiences of abuse, even though I assured the guardian (manager, social worker, foster parent) that I would not be asking direct questions. The other aspect of this response seemed to be to do with talking to the children on their own. I knew from my experience as a social worker that this was an unusual request.

Because children are regarded as being in the care of the parent, the parent is always asked first if there is a family problem. This is regarded as good practice, for not to do so, incurs indignation and protest from the parent. In following this, the parent has the first word. They define the parameters of the problem. As a consequence of this, and also because of the structurally powerful position of the parent, the child's view is devalued. Thus the professional colludes with the parent in denying the child the importance of their experience.

There is an additional aspect to this. Children are often not believed since it is thought they lie about their experiences. Though this is now recognised as a problem in identifying sexual

abuse - i.e. the readiness to dismiss the child's account - it still holds in many other areas of parent-child interaction.

For example, J.R. Spencer, a lawyer who has made a special study of the evidence of children in criminal courts where there is a charge of child cruelty, writes,

a combination of legal rules ensures either that the child's account is kept from the court, or that if it is heard, no notice is taken of it. The result is that people who abuse children often cannot be prosecuted for what they have done.

(Spencer 1987 p.1)

This effective silencing of the child, it seems, is often repeated in everyday life. So my actions in wishing to speak to the child turned this practice of 'silencing' the child upside down. It seemed to cause the adult - who served as a barrier between the child and myself, who was disturbing this taken-for-granted practice - anxiety. I interpreted this 'guarding' of the child as paternalism.

I have used the word paternalism with care. Although paternalism can be seen as benevolent, protecting the weak and the vulnerable from exploitation, it can also be understood according to the definition in the Oxford Dictionary, something "that limits the freedom of the subject by well-meant needless regulation". I use it in this sense.

I am aware that such an interpretation may be rejected, but it would be congruent with my earliest observations as a social

worker, which I referred to in the opening chapter. That is, the difficulty in gaining access to the child because of the parents' dominance. It is also congruent with the findings in two of the most recent child death inquiries, Jasmine Beckford in Brent and Kimberley Carlile in Greenwich, where the child was unable to be seen, because the parent saw this as "interference". This was well before the onset of the severe beatings that caused their deaths. The interpretation is also congruent with both a feminist and a class analysis, where it is argued that the voice of the powerful defines the situation in order to maintain control.

It seemed, then, a manifestation of mystification, for while the parent or adult says that the child needs protecting, this protection silences and thus regulates, controls and represses the anger, rage, pain and injustice felt by the child. In so doing the adult world actually protects itself. Hence I came to the conclusion that 'protecting' children from the opportunity to speak out about their experiences, can be seen as an ideology: the ideology of paternalism. It is an ideology because it pretends to be something that it is not and thus obscures the reality of the situation.

#### **Children, Parents and Family Life: The Individual Interviews**

Morgan writes that at the most fundamental level, the State is involved in the definition of what constitutes a family. The

family is presented as natural, so that legislators, interpreters and practitioners of the law are constantly addressing themselves to the notions of normal and good family practice (Morgan 1985 p.73). In this way the family is seen as the 'good society' and conflicts and contradictions are interpreted out. In my interviews with the 17 children, there was little doubt that children had internalised this idealised view of the family. Even when their own experience conflicted with this, they still maintained a belief in the family's ultimate benevolence. It seemed the myth of the perfect family was indeed the factor which enabled them to manage negative and destructive experiences, for their understanding held within itself a split. Their view maintained an image of the family as good, so that arising out of this, experiences of abuse could be understood wholly in terms of the bad parent. In this there was a familiar ideology, in that such experiences were seen wholly in terms of pathologising the individual. They were therefore still able to hold to all the ideologies of the family as propagated within patriarchal capitalism. The family was understood as separate from the political economy, and its relationship with childcare was therefore not seen to be related to the wider society.

### **Views of the family**

Children referred to the family in the following ways: "a proper family", "a real family", "a normal family" and "we're all happy families" - this last said with irony. The contradiction between

what they believed and what they experienced is demonstrated by Bob.

Bob was sixteen, a tall, fair haired boy with a subdued depressed manner. Sometimes his voice sank so low, it was difficult to hear him. He had been in care for two years and much of his conversation focused on the events leading up to this. Bob was at present in a children's home, and I asked him whether he would have preferred to be fostered:

"No. Well I would have liked to have if I was with a proper family. Like living together, getting on together. Two people are better than one, though sometimes it works out that you can get two against one, which is not very nice at all."

For Bob, a proper family was one consisting of two parents who "got on". Yet he was also aware that two parents can act together to exclude a child, so there were certain reservations and an ambivalence in his attitude.

Josie was also sixteen. She was in care, assertive, self-confident, dressed in jeans and a shirt. She smoked constantly throughout the interview and the words spilled out. Josie had learned to look after herself. She described her feelings about her foster home. She had run away from two foster homes. She said,

"They would pick on me. When they pushed me, I couldn't stand it. I'm so used to looking after myself. I can't get tied down too much. I found that in a children's home I was better off. I was more settled and I can't settle in a family as they're not my real family."

I asked Josie to tell me about her own family.

"There's six of us. Two died of cot death. One was adopted as my mum was too young and she couldn't keep the baby. One was fostered, my sister's with her third cousin and then there's me."

Josie's parents seemed not to come into the picture and her understanding of her family was based on the numbers of brothers and sisters she had. I asked her what she thought of family life.

"I'd have liked a normal family. I'd have liked my mum and dad to have stayed together. My brothers and sisters to live together, to be a big family."

Both these children were on Care Orders. Their views can be compared with George who was not in care. George had a staccato way of delivering his thoughts, and the whole time he was talking his eyes never left my face. George had heard about the interview at the youth club and had decided he wanted to be interviewed. He regarded his family, it seemed, as a safety net, so in the event of his parents splitting up, he could choose from dozens of relatives who lived nearby. I asked him whom he regarded as special. He replied,

"My dad. My family. I care for people outside the family but I care for them more than anyone. Even if they split up, I've got family, 'cos I don't think my mum and dad ever will but if they did, then my nan lives upstairs and my aunt lives round the corner. My nan's got 66 grandchildren and 33 great grandchildren and 2 more coming. She's got 10 of her own. There's about 200 of us. 100 of us met for their 60th anniversary. He's 86 and she's 82. I see them about once every fortnight."

It seemed George's evaluation of his family was somewhat idealised in the light of other comments he made and was to make, as I shall discuss further.

Ian was also not in care, the same age as Bob, but unlike him adopted a critical scepticism towards the world in general. Ian was interviewed at his home in Islington, a large house which was also shared with his mother and brother. Ian was a 'character', and was rebellious and articulate, though this was directed at the hypocrisies and oppressions of the outside world. His parents had divorced some years ago, although he had frequent contact with his father. He was tall and good looking and I interviewed him in his room. This was small and crammed with books, clothes and unwashed mugs. Ian propped himself on the bed as he talked.

"You know when you came in, and you talked to my mum and everything, and she said 'Hello,' and she made some coffee and it all gets a bit, you know when people come over, I'm sickened by how - soap opera it all is. You know, we're all happy families and I sometimes think, 'Fuck me, grandma. We're all freaks, we all smoke spliff and we swear.' And my mum would freak if we did that. I know she likes to keep up images, though usually she doesn't care."

Ian had seen through the family 'front'.

### **Living in the family**

Children's experience of family life for those who were on Care Orders, revealed the fragmentation of good experiences in their childhood. For some the concept of the secure family simply didn't exist. Their accounts were of confusion, abuse, and they were often the subjects of arbitrary decision-making or insensitive behaviour on the part of the adult world. Family life for them is a transitory moment which may be in the presence of the natural parent or the foster family.



Della was sixteen, in care and I met her in her bedsit. She was small and slim, talked endlessly, and offered me coffee and biscuits as we talked. She was warm and giving, but there was at the same time an emotional neediness about her. She had been in care since she was seven, and was fostered with the same family until she was thirteen. The first fostering placement was made by her mother.

"Mum used to go away a lot. She was young at the time. She used to go out a lot and every time my mum went away for a week or something, she sent me to foster parents and her daughter used to beat me up. Every time I told her, she didn't believe me, because I used to lie so much. I remember one time the girl threw me down the stairs. My nose was bleeding. My mother stopped me going there. I was sent to another foster mother. She was younger and she saw me crying and she said, 'Why don't you come and stay with me?' I said 'Yes' because she had a daughter as well."

Antonia was the youngest child I interviewed. She was nine and living in a children's home. I had been told she was eleven before I met her, and since I had intended only to talk with children over the age of eleven, I was faced with a decision as to whether to proceed with the interview. However Antonia expressed an interest in being interviewed, so I continued. She was small and pretty, with large dark eyes and wearing a bright pink tracksuit. She had been face painting so she sat with her face covered with stripes of orange, yellow and red patterns across her cheeks. Her story belied her appearance. I began by asking her how it was she came to be in the children's home. She answered in a low depressed voice.

"I started off my at mum's house, and then my mum put me in a foster home, and then one day when my stepdad and my grandmother came to see us, they went round the block, after they saw us, and they decided they did want us, and they

came back and asked us if we wanted to go home, and we said 'Yes,' and we did, and then we came home."

I asked again how she came to be in the children's home. She said,

"Because my mum didn't want us anymore. She had a three bedroomed house and she tried, but she couldn't so she put us in care."

The child's reaction to such manipulation was a retreat into passivity and an acceptance of whatever was to come. I asked her why she wasn't fostered. She replied wearily,

"I don't know. I haven't asked. I don't ask things. I don't like asking."

I asked Antonia if she had helped her mother when she had been at home. She spoke of when she was age six:

"Yes. I woke my brothers up in the morning, changed their nappies and that, made my mother cups of tea. She was lying in bed. I wanted to do it. I had to get them ready for nursery. I never brushed their hair. My mum did and she brushed my hair as well. I'll do what she wants, to help her."

But children not in care did not invariably give a good account of family life. I interviewed Catherine aged sixteen in a youth club. Her relationship with her mother was negative and critical, but she herself was strong, angry and articulate. What was positive for Catherine was her relationship with her sister and her father. This may have provided her with the strength to resist what she saw as her mother's negative feelings for her. She was able to distinguish and know her own identity as separate from her mother, and since she knew her own needs, she recognised her mother could not satisfy them. She started by talking of her mother.

"She's a funny kind of person. She's at work all day, and she gets up early in the morning and then she's out until four. My mum drinks a lot, she's not alcoholic, she's hardly ever in. She thinks I don't do anything for her, that I don't do any housework. She talks about my sister all the time, Judy does this, Judy does that. My sister used to do all the housework but whereas I've just left school, it's not me at the moment. My mum doesn't do any now and she wants me to do it all. It's always me. It's always been like that."

Catherine was unable to talk to her mother, and she also referred to her mother's attempts to control her and to make her into the type of woman that she herself wasn't.

"My sister's the only one in the family I can talk to about my problems. She knows I smoke, and my sister's found things I wouldn't show my mum. We share a bedroom, she understands whereas my mum's old fashioned. I couldn't talk to her about when I came on. I was really scared to tell my mum. I knew I had to, because that's life. I thought she'd hit me. I did tell her in the end. She told me she didn't want me using lillies because they're dirty, and that I should use towels. She thinks lillies are dirty, whereas I don't. I use them anyway."

In this there are echoes of Rodaway's account of beginning menstruation and her relationship with her mother (Chapter 6).

Allen too gave a depressing account of family life. Although he was not in care his childhood was permeated with abuse. He was aged 14 and I interviewed him in a youth club. I started by asking what kind of childhood he had had; he replied,

"A bad one, because of my memories of my mother being beaten up."

Later I asked what his views were on parents' rights to physically punish children.

"They must have a reason for it. When I used to go out thieving, my mum used to hit me. I used to ask her why she

used to hit me. She said it was because she didn't want me to grow up bad. That she was punishing me."

I asked whether it stopped him, or whether he would have stopped anyway.

"Haven't a clue. When I was about eight, I used to nick sweets. Then when I was eleven, I used to nick roller skates. My dad said when I first moved in with him, don't nick if you're living with me, 'cos like when he was 27 he thieved. There was a robbery and he got thirteen years for it. So he says, don't do it, because it's only you who'll feel the pain. You can't get out."

Allen's voice had become very low and subdued. His father (in fact his stepfather) seemed to have more effectively influenced him than his mother's assaults.

Only Debbie gave a positive account of family life. Her life was in some ways not so different from children in care, but her mother, a single parent, was reflective and able to share her experiences with her daughter in a positive way. Debbie was fifteen. She was direct and straightforward and another 'talker'. She started,

"We weren't a rich family. We never had been. We shared a house, they lived on top of us and we had the bottom flat. It was all small, there was only one bedroom and it was all cramped and me and my brother and my mum, we all lived in one room. My mum used to have to go to cheap shops because my dad was a terrible gambler, though he isn't now. My dad would spend all the money on the horses. He never gave my mum any money, so she had to make do with the family allowance."

Debbie mother seemed able to cope. She was able to share with her children what she was suffering, yet without making them responsible. Debbie commented,

"I think my mum's had a lot of trouble after she left my dad but my mum's always been honest with us. My mum says to me, 'I want you to be honest with me. I'm not saying you've got

to tell me everything, whatever happens to you, but I'm just saying I never want you to lie to me.' And she's done it to us. A couple of times lately she's been upset, and she'd told me and asked me what I think of it, and I think she knows she can trust me and if I have a problem, she knows I'll always... She's not like some mums, they don't really care about their kids."

### **Alternatives to the family**

In the course of conversation with these children, there were references to children's homes or to foster families. These comments were almost exclusively made by children in care, since only they had had different experiences to the natural family. There was one exception to this, an observation made by Simon who had a friend who had been taken into care and now lived in a children's home.

I found these children in care generally preferred a children's home to a foster family, on the grounds that they seemed to derive more security from being there. Jose, for example, said,

"I like being in a children's home because I like helping the young ones, looking after them and listening to them. I've always been the one they come and talk to. I've been through a lot and I understand their problems. I can help."

Andrea aged thirteen had been in care for some years and was living in a children's home. (1) She was small with a round face and knew her own mind. She had experienced abuse in different ways, but despite this she came across as tough and intelligent. She had plenty to say about all aspects of her life and I found her approach to authority refreshingly direct. A straightforward

question from me produced a number of views which were unconventional and thought out. For example, I asked her whether she liked it in the children's home. She said,

"It's alright, but I can't settle there. I want to go back to my dad, but they won't let me. I'd like to be near my family. If they put me in a long stay home, I know that I wouldn't be moving here, there and everywhere. But if they put me in a foster home and it didn't work out, I'd be moving from one place to another. In a long stay home, I'd be there all the time. I'd know what I'm doing and I could plan ahead."

Andrea has here ranked her preferences. First she would prefer to be with her father, or failing that, a long stay children's home near her family. She reasons this would enable her to plan ahead. Thirdly she points to the consequences of foster home breakdowns, "moving from one place to another".

I later asked her whether she thought children should be in care. Her response to this was from her own perspective, positive and realistic.

"Some need to be away from their parents, as well as with their parents. I go to my mum and stay there the first weekend in every month and when I get back from there, the Monday afterward, my dad comes down for his visit. So I've got a fun packed weekend at the beginning of the month, and I've got something to look forward to at the beginning of next month."

She added,

"Since I haven't been living with her, we've been getting on really well. If you see them an hour or two every day, you get on better."

This clear analysis was rare. Other children in care seemed unsettled as to where they belonged. This is possibly due to the policy of Social Service Departments, which after rehabilitation

of the 'family' has failed, choose a foster placement as first priority. All these decisions and workings out take time, so children remain uncertain whether they will remain at home, be placed in a children's home or more likely, fostered out.

I spoke to Kelly in the bedroom of her foster family. Kelly was fourteen, a rather colourless personality. She was quiet, initiated little conversation, and seemed crushed by her life's experiences. I had to work hard to establish rapport with her, but her reticence was unsurprising given that she had had two fostering breakdowns. She told me her mother was schizophrenic and chose to open the interview by telling me of her fostering experience. Kelly wanted a mother. She spoke of when she was six.

"I called her mum, but it got so bad she used to hit me around the head. She had a little girl of three and a boy of seven. In the end she didn't want me so I left. I wanted to leave, but then the social worker took me to a psychiatrist. She thought there was something wrong with me."

One can only speculate as to the reasons which underlay that decision, but I asked Kelly whether she would want to return to her mother. She said, "No, because I'd be looking after her and I've got good mates around here." Kelly seemed to be conscious of and therefore rejecting the idea that she might have to mother her mother.

Stacey was similarly critical. She was fourteen with a directness about her. She was a combination of being both tough and vulnerable, and has been in care since she was seven. She was angry, with her foster family and with her social worker, whom she saw as not listening to her. I asked her how she had got on with her foster parents.

"It was murder. I hated it. I was accused of doing this and that. I'd be locked up in my room for days. I didn't tell my social worker, because I didn't get on with her. She used to hit me, and I was scared of her." (Stacey is referring to the foster mother.)

Stacey told me she would have preferred to be in a children's home, but despite this, after the breakdown of the foster placement just mentioned, she was eventually fostered again.

Simon was the only young person who was not in care and who spontaneously made a reference to life outside the natural family. He told me about a friend who had been in trouble at home. He said,

"I've had friends who've been kicked out of their home and they've been really hit. This friend had his hair cut off by his mother, and now he's been in care and in a home for about a year and a half. Before that when he was at home he was quite disruptive. He's turned out really good. The family was a bad influence on him, and it was keeping him back. He could have gone far but his family was keeping him back."

Fostering was clearly, then, not a positive experience for all. Stacey, Kelly and Della had all been abused in the foster family, though they had been fostered to escape their mistreatment by the natural family. After a time talking to these children, one begins to feel that children are treated as if they are



commodities. They move between foster parents, children's homes and back to the natural parents. The activities of Social Service Departments seem only to continue the misuse of children initiated by the parent, and the views of the child are continuously ignored. The child is powerless in the hands of the adult world, who make decisions with little regard for the child's own feelings.

### Identity and Gender

Identity and gender are integrally related, and can, as I argued in Chapter 4, be understood as developing firstly within the family. Adopting stereotypical gender behaviour may occur through identification with the same sex parent, or coercively, when the parent insists on certain behaviour. How the child saw the parent was fundamental in constructing a sense of their own being.

It seemed in talking to children where the child was engaged in an oppositional relationship to the parent, there was a consciousness of not wanting to be like them. So the more traditional parental gender behaviour was, the less likely the child was to deviate. This may be because there was no space given to do this, but it may also be because such behaviour conformed to social expectations. Where a child experienced disappointment or anger with the same sex parent, there was a tendency to turn to the opposite parent. Hence expectations from parents to conform could

result in the child experiencing oppression if it was coercively applied.

### Boys and their parents

Ian, aged sixteen, had a well developed sense of self, and this incorporated a critique of stereotypical gender behaviour. This had developed from within an oppositional relationship to his father. He had chosen consciously not to be like his father. In negating his father he was at the same time constructing for himself, who and what he wanted to be. Yet this development of self took place within the constellation of relationships between his brother, his mother, and his father, as these affected him. He described how he perceived his father's capacity to advise and guide him; that is, how he experienced him as a father.

"My dad, he's not the type. I don't seek, I don't take any advice. If its good advice, I'll take it but I won't let him influence anything, because I don't think he was too responsible about us as a parent. I think I should get some help there, but he didn't give it."

Ian was able to see how his father's behaviour towards his mother had influenced his brother's relationship with himself. Whereas his brother identified with his father, Ian had formed an identification with his mother. Within these oppositions Ian struggled to develop himself.

"He'd torment her in the sense he'd never see it. He'd be so hard and I can see my brother does it to me. He says 'look, I'm alright, I'm not angry. It's cool, cool', and I'm saying 'Yes, yes. I'm angry, you know and I'm arguing'. And he'll say, 'There's no argument, I'm not arguing', and that sort of thing. Another time, he'll ignore me and that'll really vex me."

Here Ian is fighting back, is resisting by insisting on an alternative perception of the way things are in the family. He was able to assert a sense of self, because the mystification of his family were not totally hegemonic. It was his mother that was able to show him another perception, and had accepted his criticisms. He continued elaborating on the alliance between his brother and his father, and of his increasing consciousness.

"If I've done a mistake, I'll say, 'look I've done a mistake', but instead they wouldn't admit they were wrong. They'd say, 'Look I've done an Ian'. That was when I was quite young and I hadn't sussed them out, but now I don't let my brother or my dad put me down. It happened once there was a sort of argument. It was a sort of turning point, you know like on T.V. it happens someone has a sort of argument and they understand for the rest of their lives, but it doesn't happen like that. You can't understand that quickly, you start to understand. If he gave me respect, then I'd respect him."

The issue of respect was important for Ian. For Ian, a parent had to earn respect and he linked this with a critical approach to the adult world. That is to say, Ian's rejection of his father in some ways laid the foundations for how he approached society politically. He said,

"I'd prefer a dad I could really respect, but I don't really respect him as much as I could. He's very adolescent. He's a 53 year old adolescent and that just about sums it up. The reason I don't respect my dad is....I suss out a lot of things he does and I think, are you really doing that for me. I try and see what he'll benefit from it. He doesn't realise it. He doesn't know, so he can't see the damage that's been done to my mum."

Hence Ian had "sussed", but his dad "didn't know" and "didn't realise". Ian went on to say,

"Sometimes a grownup gets to a certain age and they think they're grownup and they're not. There's so many idiots around, they get drunk and they batter their wives or whatever. I'm ashamed of some things, like the slave trade. We're really like children in some ways. I can get stropky

about principles. I can get into an argument easily if someone's sitting there, and saying about South Africa, and I come up with my views and suddenly I realise I'm in a class of thirty racists. Then I'm in shit. I'm not too hot about authority. Some grownups expect to get respect. I will respect someone, but then I think at other times, you silly old....you're ignorant."

Ian's politics extended to an awareness of gender issues. He said,

"Males are so egotistical. They always want to be so macho. They don't want to be looking sissy. If you found a plant beautiful, or someone beautiful or a song beautiful, like we were standing there looking at the moonlight and listening to the music. It's really nice. It's all this rushing. You won't allow yourself time to think. I don't know if I'm thought out, but I feel I've sussed out certain things. I feel when I'm walking down the street, I know something. With my brother we talk about things for hours and we don't get bored, and then we go into school the next day and the teacher says, 'I know you' and they reckon they've sussed you in one."

Ian's sense of self and views on respect, may be compared with that of George. For George, it was essential he had respect for his parents. There was no questioning as to whether it should be earned, for as he understood it there were no choices. He did not see that as he experienced it, it was an element of control within his relationship with his parents. Yet by conforming to his parents' insistence on respect, George was able to feel safer. Insofar as he respected his parents, it was less likely that family life would be disrupted. The notion of respect also provided an explanation for his parents' criticisms of him; it was because they respected him. George commented thus,

"If your mum had a go at you, because you'd come in late, that didn't mean your mum didn't respect you, and the same if she didn't buy you anything, or take notice of you. If your mum didn't respect you, she wouldn't tell you off."

So for George, both attention and lack of attention meant he was respected. The notion of respect seemed to dominate him. He described a visit to his friend's house.

"I've been in a friend's house and I know the atmosphere. You can tell what kind of family it is. If a kid was respecting his mum or if a kid was respecting his dad, you can tell by the atmosphere."

In George's family it seemed, respect was a way of ensuring domination over the children by the parents. George identified with this, for he saw respect equalled unquestioning obedience to parental rules. He said,

"If I did have kids, I'd like them to respect the things you do for them. I wouldn't like them to, just muck about like. Be in what time they want, tell you what they want. I'd tell them where they can go and where they can't go, and then when they're older, you wouldn't have to have a go at them. They'd respect you."

I had no sense of George's self, but then neither did I of his parents'. They failed to come across in any authentic way, and their relationship with their son seemed based on his rationalised acceptance of their view of the world. Ultimately it was based on domination, though this was mystified in two ways. Firstly by their covert promise that if he continued to practise football, he would one day make it. Hence his resentful acquiescence to the long hours of practice. Secondly by his identification with the notion of 'respect'. All kinds of repressions could be justified using this. George was however, well and truly 'of it', since he saw himself as a father also using this method to control his children.

Sometimes a child's experience of their parent influenced their sense of self in a way they were not aware of. Simon had been abandoned by his mother at the age of three. He lived with his father and stepmother, but his identity seemed imbued with a sense of sadness, such that he searched the streets metaphorically for his mother.

"As I get older, I get more sceptical. I question more things in life, and stand back and look at things before I do anything. Routines are really tiring, school, homework and then Friday night comes and I think something is really going to happen and it comes and I go round to a friend's house and it's the same every week."

I asked how it used to be.

"I don't know. People used to knock on the door and I'd go out every night and I'd go to all kinds of places and I'd get into chases just for a laugh. I don't do that anymore. People have got into their shells and I walk down the street and they're looking at their feet. If I look around they're not smiling. They don't look too happy and I think this country is going down the drain and there's nothing people can do. I get really angry."

I asked whether he could talk to his parents about these feelings.

"Well my dad seems to have become a workaholic. He works really a lot. He says he's going to stop. He's a barrister, he seems to be going crazy. He seems to be work crazy. He's trying to prove something."

Simon expressed his anger at his father's priorities in the following.

"Me and my dad argue a lot. Sometimes I deliberately say the opposite to him, pretty stupid but we just have rows. I feel he doesn't have time for me and he doesn't do anything with me at all. I felt I needed a lot of attention. I felt down in the dumps and needed someone to talk to. My mum (his stepmother) talked to him about me, and it's got better over the last few weeks. It's getting better."

I asked him to tell me about his family. He said,

"I've two brothers, a father and a stepmother. I've got a real mum. She lives in America. She left us when I was

three years old and I haven't seen her since. She hasn't kept in contact."

I asked him why she had left.

"Well... she turned out... she was a lesbian. I was pretty angry about it. I can remember that. I can remember right back. I can remember things right back to being in her room and helping my mum to pack up. Then me and my dad walked down to a shop and I bought a big fire engine and it was a really good fire engine and I've still got it."

There was a silence and then he said,

"My mum, it's up to her. She could find out about me, if she wanted. I can't go out there, so it seems like she doesn't want to keep in touch."

I asked about how he came to find out his mother was a lesbian.

"I was told when I was pretty young. I was told straight away. I've been brought up to think it's not too bad. I thought it was odd when I was getting into adolescence, but at the time I didn't. I was just angry she left, because of that. I've been told I used to cry for two hours. Jane (his stepmother) helped me a lot. Before that I hadn't learned how to get my anger out, and I was just not letting anything out. It was all bottled up and I felt all messed up inside. I still haven't got it all out of my system."

I asked if he had photos of her.

"Yes, I've got a few photos of her, but I haven't looked at her since I was about ten. Every now and again I think about her and I wonder what she's doing and I wonder if she'd like to see me. I feel a bit sad. She could just write and say hello. She could be a bit like my gran and if she is, I know exactly what she'll do. She's running away from it. Now I think about the good things about her. I don't think about why she left. I think what it would be like to see her now, and what my reactions would be. I don't know if I'd like to see her or not, but I'd like to ask a few questions."

I asked what he would like to know.

"What happened? Why did you do it? What are you doing now? I'd like to see what she looks like, like I think she'd look like my brother, because he doesn't look like me at all. I look like my dad."

## Girls and their parents

Whereas boys saw their relationship with their parents more exclusively, girls were, if they had a brother, inclined to note differences in how their mother related to them in comparison. This might be conceptualised as inequality, but might not. But talking to the girls seemed to confirm the clinical observations of feminist psychoanalysts. There was less care offered to girls, if there were boys in the family.

Stacey, in care, saw this injustice. She said her mother had wanted a boy and that if she had had a boy, then his name would be Stacey. Hence her choice. I asked how Stacey would, in view of this, bring up any children she might have of her own. She said,

"I'd treat them all the same. I'd go for the girls as well, not just the boys. I'd rather have a girl any day. I wouldn't spoil them, to the extent my mum's spoilt them two. Because when my mum says no, that's it, but he goes on at my mum and so she says, 'Oh, go on, do it'."

A similar experience was related by Debbie. She said of her brother,

"Well, after two or three days, he goes into sulks and he knows what works with my mother. She falls for that. He goes into his bedroom, he won't come out, he won't do this, he won't do that, so after about two or three days, he's watching telly, and he's all quiet and not saying anything, and my mum says, 'Go on, get out' and she gives in to him. So every time now he does something, my mum can't think of what else to punish him with."

She continued her reflections on the differences between her mother's treatment of her and her brother. She said,

"Me and my brother have stupid rows, and my mum has always said her favourites are little boys. She loves them. When I was eight or nine, I used to say you don't love me and



she'd say.... With me, she's a bit more stricter than with my brother. Once I said he could go to bed earlier than me, and he started crying and she let him get away with it."

Debbie was not able to perceive her mother's discrimination in favour of her brother. To some extent she idealised her mother, and this did not allow her to conceive of any criticisms of her. It seemed that Debbie might parent her mother, and in an attempt to explore this further, I asked her whether she thought her mother was different with her because she was a girl. She replied, and her account was full of contradictions and confusions,

"No. It's because I'm the first born. Like I always have to tidy my room, but she does it for my brother. It's got nothing to do with that, because my mum's not like that. She's not got favourites, but if she had, it would more likely to be me, because I'm with her all the time. I help her, I do the washing up and take the washing in. My brother's got round my mum. My friends say it's the same with their mums. If we have a row and I hit my brother, I get the blame and this is the same with everyone. It's because he's the first."

Debbie seemed not aware of the sentiments expressed in the first sentence compared with the final statement.

This comment reminded me of Antonia who had also said she would do what her mother wanted, and her comment was followed by a reference to the pictures of her mother that she kept on the wall. Later she had informed me, unprompted, that she wasn't wanted. I asked how she knew this. She said,

"They told me. They told me. My brother had a chance of going to my mum's house or coming to my nan's and they waited ages for his decision, and he wanted to go to my mum's."

Antonia was still only nine.

In comparison, Josie, whose mother was alcoholic, had turned to her father, and this again confirms the analysis of Eichenbaum and Orbach whereby the daughter turns to the father, if the mother is seen to fail her (see Chapter 4). She said,

"I was my dad's favourite. He used to take me everywhere he went, to see his mates. My mum and dad split up a lot when I was little. When they got back together, I used to go backwards and forwards between foster parents and my dad. Then my dad got married to another woman. I went to stay with my dad. I was only there three days and I went to work with him. He finished work early and we went to his club, before we went home. We were coming home and my dad had a motorbike accident and he got killed. He flew off the bike and landed on a lamp post. I had a broken jaw and I had to have it wired up."

She then spoke of her mother,

"She became an alcoholic when my dad and she split up. Everyone was running her down. When she was an alcoholic no-one helped her. If they could have sorted things out, then maybe the family would still be together. Because no-one bothered she just kept on being an alcoholic. Things got worse, until three years ago she gave it up. She could have died. She had more drink in her veins.... She gave it up. She got herself back to normal and she started fighting for us. When she couldn't have us, it was like she swiped to the floor and she was going to take to drink again. I persuaded her not to, I was going to come back to her. From then on, she never had help. Nobody could be bothered."

Despite her anger at the inability of others to help her mother to change, Josie was able to survive because she was able to realistically assess her own capacity to help her mother. This necessarily depended on a strong sense of herself as separate from her mother. I asked her if she would like to go back to her mother. She said,

"No, I wouldn't go back just because she's given up drink. There'd have to be a lot of things that change. Her and her boyfriend would have to accept me. Even though I've been through a lot and tried to help her, every time I've managed to succeed, she just kicks me away. Now I've forgotten everything. Why should I carry on? I'll just stay friends with my mum. I'll just keep things together. She knows if

she has any problems, I'll always try and help, but I won't be able to take over. I'm quite lucky my dad taught me a lot of things. He gave me my personality. People say I'm just like my dad. He knew what he was doing."

## **Abuse**

This section discusses abuse as understood and experienced by the child. As I have earlier stated, no direct questions about abuse were put to the children. I had introduced myself to them by saying I was interested in their childhood as lived in the family. Within the context of the conversation, as indicated in Appendix A, I might ask were they ever hit or shouted at, but generally experiences that might be interpreted as abusive were initiated by the children themselves, as the interview with Andrea demonstrates in Appendix B. The following account therefore seeks to show the child's experience and their rejection of abuse where they saw it as unjust and therefore illegitimate.

Abuse for the child was also experienced as a state of being; it was not just an event definable by a set of incidents. It thus covers manipulation, misunderstanding, invalidating, indifference, lies, mystification, abandonment and objectification. Viewed in this way all children, whether in care or not, experienced these to some degree.

I have already identified in the previous discussion on autobiographies what seemed to me four forms of child abuse: an insistence that the child conforms to adult norms no matter how unreasonable, creating an abusing atmosphere, manipulating the child, and finally objectifying the child. In talking to the children I noted other forms: unreasonably blaming the child, the physical and/or emotional consequences arising out of the child's involvement in observing an assault on their mother, feelings derived from abandonment and the perception of that as rejection, and objectification.

The classification of abuse in this way is somewhat arbitrary, in that although ~~some~~ extreme cases belong here, other forms of abuse have already been considered under another heading, e.g. Simon talking of his mother's abandonment. Abuse is, as I have pointed out, part of a relationship and is therefore woven into the fabric of everyday life. Experiences of abuse are therefore part of the previous discussions on the family and on identity and gender.

Abuse is also, and can be interpreted as, punishment, so I was interested in children's views of punishment. During my experience as a social worker I had encountered parental denials of abuse, which they saw as punishment, and therefore legitimate. What was the child's view, and what was the relationship between punishment and abuse and being in care? Were children in care more likely to see punishment as abuse, given they were in care because of abuse? And as a corollary, would children not in care

make a rigid distinction between abuse and punishment? The answers to the questions were complex and led me to reflect on the relationship between abuse and punishment. I discuss this issue in the final section of this chapter.

### Child blame

Children could be condemned for actions that the parent saw as the child's fault. Blaming the child in this way justified for the parent their reaction, no matter how extreme this was.

Bob began with an account of his mother's perception of him. She experienced him as powerful and as having a malevolent force over her. This was talked of in metaphors (2): Bob could turn food bad. He said,

"She thought I was winding her up. She thought I'd done the bad food in the fridge. There was something wrong with the fridge, the food kept going bad, it would keep defrosting and she thought I kept moving it out."

As Bob struggled to make sense of his mother's madness, he took into himself her view of him and yet still struggled to retain some element of his own understanding of what happened. This clarity however was to become undermined to the extent he lost for a while a sense of his own identity. When he was fourteen, his mother made a serious physical attack on him.

"From there it went onto her thinking I hit myself. I needed to get up one Sunday, I said something, helping her out. She threw a fit. She banged my head against the wall, and I think concussion might have caused it, and then she went away. She phoned up that night. I woke up with bruises all over my face and I was looking at my face and wondering where that had come from. She left me until

Wednesday night. I went to the doctors. I said a friend had beaten me up."

I asked Bob why he had protected his mother.

"Why, because I loved her. She doesn't really know what she'd done. I went into care like that."

From that time Bob was subjected by his mother to a relentless manipulation. It was necessary for her that Bob saw her assault in the way she wanted it to be seen. He was to tell Social Services that he had assaulted himself. Such was her power over him and his own vulnerability, he became at times unsure himself of what had happened.

"She said to me, I'm sure you did them, because when I went away, you had no bruises. I was saying no, but because I wasn't allowed to have a break, I was getting this all the time. It was like torture."

In the end, he was broken. He said,

"In the end, I said I'd done it. She got me to go to a social worker, and told him, she went to write a letter to her solicitor that I did it, that I'd made up this story about hitting my face with a clock, banged my head against it, there were bruises here and bruises there, and the argument was I couldn't have done it, the amount of bruises there were. It was that bad."

Bob returned home. He said his mother was "content", but within a month it happened all over again, and he was further subjected to his mother's physical assaults. Bob now began to resist. He told the social worker that he refused to go home again and that he was not going to see his mother. He had begun it seemed to understand the nature of the relationship and because of this he was able to develop a securer sense of his identity. I asked whether he would now like to see his mother.

"No, not any more. I'd leave it two years. I get all the hassle. I want to wait until I'm a bit older and I can handle it better. She has power over me. Not physical

power, but mental power. If I'm older, I wouldn't hit her. I'd have more mental power. Before I was still getting hit."

Stacey experienced abuse both in her foster family and within her relationship with her mother. She talked of these in different ways; one was concrete, its injustice more easily grasped, the other could only be understood in the context of her own pain and self-hatred. Stacey began by relating the incident that precipitated her refusal to return to the foster parents. She told her story with passion and anger.

"Once I ran away, it was Ron's birthday and she'd made chocolate cake. I hated chocolate cake. Anyone can tell you that. She'd made a chocolate cake, and I came down in the morning and she started accusing me of eating this chocolate cake. It was a Sunday morning and because I kept denying it, because I hadn't done it, she kicked me to get up the stairs. I went up to my room, and I had nothing to eat all day. She wouldn't let me go to school that morning until I owned up. She went out and left me in the house on my own, so I went downstairs and ate some bread because I was starving. I left a note, saying I've gone now. I went to my mum's. I walked for miles and then jumped a bus. When I got home my mum wasn't exactly surprised to see me, because they'd phoned her. I had to go back. I didn't want to, but they made me. My mum said she'd get into trouble and I didn't want her to get into trouble."

Stacey's rebellion seemed to give her the strength to resist, for she said when it came to her review she was able to refuse to return.

Stacey's experience of her mother's ambivalence and rejection of her was expressed in powerful imagery and metaphor. Stacey felt what she couldn't conceptualise directly. She spoke symbolically. She felt like shit. She compared her own situation with that of her brothers. She begins with an assessment by her friend.

"My friend says that Jamey's spoilt. I said I know, just like Chris. She said you were never spoilt, that's what I can't understand. I never was. Chris was always mummy's little boy and that's that. I was just like... I'd come out of the wrong hole or something, come out of the dustbin or something. He always seems to get a lot more attention than me. But as far as my mum's concerned, he's the blue eyed angel. He can't do any wrong."

Stacey again identifies here the differential care given to her brother compared with that given to herself.

#### **Child assault and matrimonial assault**

In Chapter 5, I drew attention to the relationship between men's assault on their partners and how this was likely to also involve a child. Straus' study had also noted this connection in their nation-wide survey of domestic violence (1981). Two children gave clear accounts of how their mother's subjection to violence had a knock-on effect on them. The following gives particularly vivid accounts of male oppression and hatred for women, and how the child saw it.

Andrea's experience of physical punishment occurred within the struggle between her mother and her husband, Andrea's stepfather, and between the two parents and herself. Andrea said her stepfather was Moslem, but he was also male and these two powerful structures and ideologies (Islam and masculinity) were particularly destructive for Andrea. She defined herself as a victim between the age of six and eleven, for it was at that age she came into care. Andrea's account also demonstrates her



increasing understanding and resistance to abuse. In this way, there are some similarities to Bob, who also stepped outside the family for help. Andrea began by describing a scene where her mother was beaten, and she phoned for the police, but this account merges into one where Andrea is beaten and her mother phones for her first husband.

"One day, it must have been about three months before I went into care, he came in expecting my mum to have his dinner on the table. She'd been looking after the kids all day, because it was the holidays and the two babies were ill. He came in and told her to get the dinner on the table. She asked him to wait a while. He started hitting her. I went out to my next door neighbour, and phoned the police and the police came and took my half brothers and sisters and then there was a big fuss.... My stepdad would beat me for something (sic). My mum phoned my dad and told him to come and get me. My dad took me home and I had bruises all up my arm, all down my back, and all down my legs."

Andrea's experience was not merely that her mother colluded with her beating by her stepfather, but that she actually joined in. She says, "When he went, my mum started", but one presumes that at this stage she would be little, probably under eight. By the time she reached eleven, she had started fighting back, literally.

"She began to realise the more she hit me, the more I was going to hit her back. The same with my stepdad, when he hit me with the rolling pin, I picked up a stick and threw it at him and it cut his face. Because they kept hitting me and that, it gave me to taking things from them. I was taking money and that. That made it worse and one day they were fasting and they expected me to have nothing. I'd eaten a chewing gum and they started hitting."

Andrea's experience of her childhood is permeated with violence; her stepfather is thrown down the rubbish chute by her father in a fight between them, while Andrea is prepared to fight with a girl for calling her mother a slag. The police are constantly called by different members of the family.

Apart from this Andrea says that her father is accused of sexual abuse by her mother. What is one to make of this? Andrea's own account is to deny this, but then she "didn't see him for about two years". Where was he during this time? Andrea states her mother was blackmailing her, that no one would listen to her, even though she attended a children's group at Great Ormond Street. She also states she had controlled and restricted access to her father, once she did start to visit him again.

Yet whatever did and did not happen, there is no doubt that as far as Andrea is concerned, it was her father she loved and with whom she felt safe. If he had sexually abused her and she did not know it, this indicates the perverting and damaging influence her family experience had had on her. If he had not abused her and had been unjustly accused, this indicates the pain and damage the welfare state can exercise when in partnership with certain members of the family.

Josie seemed unclear as to why she came into care. She was protective of her mother whom she said was an alcoholic. One could only assume the nature of this child's abuse and I felt it inappropriate to question her closely. The precipitating event for her coming into care seemed to be based on her mother's heavy drinking and her relationship with a violent and destructive boyfriend. She described it thus,

"My mum's boyfriend is 16 years younger. He smashed the house and wrecked the house. I was taken away. My mum didn't bother to do anything. The social worker didn't even

bother to do anything with my mum's boyfriend. My mum was dumped with him, because no one else would listen to him."

Through this account one gets an impression of an all powerful male and an inadequate and powerless mother and social worker. Josie aged ten could not face this, and she was subsequently to become a "runner" when placed with foster parents who tried to control her, which in Josie's eyes was inevitably seen as "picking on her". Her early childhood had meant she had to learn independence, a quality that was not appreciated by the foster parents. She said,

"When they pushed me, I couldn't stand it. I'm so used to looking after myself. I can't get tied down too much."

Nevertheless, by running, Josie had learned a resistance. She had learned to rely on herself.

#### **Rejection and abandonment**

Children's response to parental rejection and abandonment was complex. They would struggle to make sense of it, trying to see such experiences from the parent's perspective. Della's childhood was such a complex of confusion, a network of parental loss, deceit and rejection, that she attempted, at the age of 14, to kill herself. Other children, such as Simon, referred to earlier, struggled with their anger and their sense of betrayal.

Antonia, aged nine, told me how she made sense of her disappointment with her mother. At the present, there is no

indication of any anger. She told me that her mother had often said she would turn up to see her at the children's home, but then didn't. She said,

"My mum was supposed to come today, but she didn't. She probably didn't have any money, she's not very rich and then I didn't want her to come and see me too much because she's buying all new furniture for us, and I don't want her to use all her money up."

Mother-daughter relationships were invariably complex. It seemed rare for a mother as a single parent, to physically assault a girl (3), but she would express a certain callousness as she worked through her own ambivalence at being a mother and a woman. The claustrophobia of family life enabled this to be acted out. The daughter could carry for her mother her own negative disregard for her daughter as Della experienced. Della's childhood was a complex of confusion, deceit and abandonment as well as the more easily identifiable forms of abuse.

Della had lived her early childhood thinking that her father was her real and actual father. As I have noted, the importance of the father in the nuclear family as experienced today, is that he acts as a balance or an intermediary between the daughter and the mother. So if the mother fails to mother, the daughter has the opportunity to turn to another. The father has the potential and the responsibility for her in the way that no one else has. These are the processes that underlie the power and the significance of the father. Given the importance of the father, it is sadly inevitable that the father will fail his daughter. Della was to suffer disillusionment. At the age of seven she was informed that

the man who she thought was her father, wasn't. She became profoundly confused,

"That was a shock. When I was seven, that's when I found out. All those years. I thought my sister's dad was my dad, and I called him dad. I can't remember who told me he wasn't my father. Now when I go and see my sister, I can't call him dad, plus I've got a stepdad. I don't call him anything. When I see him now, I can't say dad. When I lived with my mum, I tried to call my stepdad, dad, but it didn't work. When I write a letter, I write dad."

Della had experienced the disillusionment and betrayal of family life. The facts in themselves are not shocking, but she had to reorientate herself within a network of male relationships that had turned out to be something other than what she had been led to believe. How was she to relate to two stepfathers and an absent father? She had also to come to terms with her mother's and her stepfather's deception, and the abandonment of her by her father.

After Della had left her foster parent, it was arranged that she should return to her mother. Della, like Bob and Stacey talked of her experiences and her pain in terms of a metaphor. Talking of school represented Della's wish to return home and to understand the nature of her relationship with her mother. She was thirteen at the time.

"It was in the country, and the school. I couldn't go to school. I liked the school. I saw the school from the outside. I couldn't wait to go to school, but the first day I went to school... it was just the way I felt, I burst out crying. I didn't want to go back there. It was a shock because you think it's going to be really nice. It wasn't like that."

Della stayed there for a year, but her disappointment was profound. She could not confront this, both because she did not

understand it and because its realisation was repressed. The reality of this disturbed and frightened her, and it reached a crisis after she made a visit to a friend in London. Here she did have some space to reflect on what she really wanted, but she was unable to cope with it.

"I'd been up to London and stayed with a friend. I didn't want to go back. I rang her up and said I didn't want to go and I put the phone down on her. It was really bad. She started crying and phoned the social worker. The social worker took me all the way back to my mum's. I took an overdose. I wanted to kill myself. I didn't worry about that. I'd seen a programme about it. I thought I wanted to do it. I took these tablets. I was nearly being sick at the time. I thought I'd go to sleep. My mum was watering the plants in the garden. She did this every night. I went to my bed. I lay in bed and tried to go to sleep. My heart felt like my head. It was like a big cassette recorder in my room with a heartbeat and you could hear it. It was driving me crazy. I tried to get up. I couldn't see properly. I went to the stairs and fell down. My mum came. I told her I'd taken the tablets. She said what tablets. She hit me across the face."

Della had learnt to carry the responsibility of the relationship with her mother. She thought that by expressing her own needs she would destroy her mother. Rather than do this she was prepared to sacrifice herself. She took onto and into herself, her mother's rejection and could not be angry, for she had not learnt to be angry. She had been taught to repress this for the sake of her mother. She was to have no needs of her own and her deeply disturbed act of self-destruction was further misunderstood and trivialised as "attention seeking". She continued,

"It was my mum. She thought she hadn't done a good enough job, I was hurting my mum. Like I was the first child and see how it goes. It wasn't because I had a problem and really wanted attention. I think they thought that at the hospital. If it was that, I could just cut my finger or something. I really didn't know what to do. My mum wanted me to go back to school. I couldn't take going back to school. They didn't understand."

## Objectification

George gave the clearest account of a reifying relationship between parent and child. George's life seemed to revolve around what his parents wanted him to do. One can only speculate why this was so, but it was, clearly, important to them all that George should be successful. The task set for George was to be a very successful football player. George spent a lot of time and energy thinking about this and trying to understand. I had asked him what was good about his life.

"That my dad wants me to play football and I'm doing well there, in the club. That's probably the best thing. And just to show my mum and dad trust me and all that, and I've got two brothers and I've got a nice house and mum and dad care about me."

George had been playing football since he was seven, and his father had been the school coach also since that time. This meant that George practiced two or three hours every day. George was hoping that it would 'all come out right in the end', by which he meant that he hoped 'to make it'. I asked him what his parents would say, if he refused to play football. He said,

"They'd take it hard, and they'd try and persuade me to play, but if I didn't enjoy it, they'd let me stop."

Later he gave another version, implying their tolerance wouldn't be as he had said. He referred to the rows he was sometimes involved in with his parents, and I asked him what they were about.

"Because they want me to play so much football. He's always telling me to go out training. In a way, though, I cheat, because I don't go out. He just keeps on at me, but I'm glad that he does, because I've got to do it for my mum and my dad."

I begin to suspect that his football was as he said for his mum and dad, to keep them together. He then said,

"You know what you said, that you'd talked to kids in homes, what do they say, do they respect their parents?"

I asked him what was his guess. He said,

"If they've been in trouble at home, and their mum and dad split up and they can't keep up. The children should still respect them for what they've done."

I asked whether he was scared of going into a home and he said,

"Yes, but as I respect my mum and dad, it won't happen."

Later I asked him if things had been different, when he was younger.

"I didn't have worries, not worries, actual worries, but then you didn't care. You didn't have schedules, you know, time tables."

It was at this point, he actually allowed himself to voice dissent. I said,

"Does that heavy time table piss you off?"

He replied tersely,

"Yes, it does."

It seemed George's parents were using him as a way to find security and an identity for themselves. In this George was struggling in a relationship that was ultimately reifying. However he found it difficult to resist because he was trapped in the mystifications of having to have "respect" and this prevented



him from seeing with any clarity the process of parental control and repression.

#### Children's views on punishment

To refer to punishment to children was to immediately define that the conversation proceeded in a particular way. Punishment is understood to be meted out because a child (in this case) has done something wrong. So there is always the possibility that it is interpreted as therefore being justifiable. Yet punishment can be seen as part of an abusing continuum and it is debatable within any particular personal and social context whether it is justifiable, even assuming that one agrees in principle with the efficacy of punishment. Punishment is also seen as the outcome of an action, or lack of action, on the part of a child. It therefore avoids or elides punishing, e.g. punishing atmospheres, silences, invalidation of the child's experiences, or denials of the child's feelings.

The questions I asked therefore produced certain responses, which avoided the subtleties of the child's experiences. I was interested in whether children questioned the concept of punishment (defined by them as being hit, shouted at) and if they did, what they did about it.

Four children were critical: Simon and Debbie, who were not in care, and Andrea and Bob, who were, and who had had particular

damaging experiences of assault at the hands of their parents. Three other children, none in care, accepted punishment. One, George, thought it showed parental respect.

### Criticising punishment

I asked Simon whether he had ever been hit.

"I used to get hit once then they told me they felt really bad about it and they stopped doing it, because I said I didn't like it. I don't like the idea of being smacked by someone a lot stronger than me, and if they're that much stronger than me, they can talk it over with me."

Debbie said of her mother,

"She's never hit us. She only hit us a couple of times when we were little. Dad's never hit us. She punishes us with words and saying we're not going out."

I asked her whether she believed in children being hit.

"No. I don't think hitting them gets them anywhere. If it does anything, it brings them up to be rough kids, because they're used to being hit all the time and that's how they're going to grow up. I think the best punishment is keeping them in and stopping them going somewhere special. A couple of times my mum hit me, when I was young and that didn't do us good. I know a boy who lives up at the Angel, and this boy went home late and his dad opened up the door and punched him in the face. He's 13 and he looks a lot older than he is, like he's 16 and he's tough. If there's a fight he's first to be there and under his bed, he's got machetes. Lots of people have seen them. When he was younger, they hadn't got a lot of money, and I think his mum is an alcoholic and his dad....I think he's been brought up rough and that's why he's like that."

Andrea's opposition to punishment was to hit back, she said.

"She began to realise the more she hit me, the more I was going to hit back. The same with my stepdad, when he hit me with a rolling pin, I picked up a stick and threw it at him and it cut his face."

Bob had had his head "bashed against the wall" and was concussed.

His mother then disappeared for two days. He said,

"I thought I could look after myself, cook myself a decent meal. I had the front door keys. I went to the doctor's. I said a friend had beaten me up, but it took some time for him to believe me."

Later he refused to go home again, and was waiting until he had more "mental power" and therefore could "handle it better".

### Accepting punishment

Paul, the brother of Stacey, was not in care. I asked him whether he had ever been hit. He said,

"They hit me when I was young. They hit me to make me understand not to do it again, so I didn't do it again. Now I don't get hit. Now I just get told off."

(He was a tall fourteen year old.) I asked him whether he thought children should be hit.

"Yes, if they do something bad, when they're young, to get taught a lesson not to do anything bad, to teach them to behave. I think it right that parents should have a go at their children if they do something bad."

What about parents shouting, I asked.

That's another thing, to liven the kids up. If you shout, you've got to have a reason. Some shout if they don't like the kids."

Paul then made a distinction between punishment and abuse. He said,

"When I was at school, children with black eyes, that's cruel. Some children say it's from a hiding, that people have beaten them up at school, because when they get home, their mum'll beat them up again. It's alright from the dad, like a smack, but when it comes from the parents it could be violence."

Paul was aware of the necessity to maintain the privacy of the family, the family "front" but clearly did not conceptualise it in this way. His explanation is pragmatic and based on the recognition that parents may rule by coercion. So like battered wives, he knew that the exposure of assault might incur escalating violence from the parent.

Allen, also not in care, told me that parents have a reason for physical punishment. In his case, it was because he went out "thieving" (cited earlier).

I asked George whether he had been hit. He said,

"Only if I do really bad things, like I bring trouble to the house, if the police are brought to the house. I always respect my mum and I hope she'll hit me if I do things wrong, because I wouldn't like to betray her on anything like that, or embarrass her."

George had fully internalised the belief that punishment was necessary and deserved, to the extent he hoped when he "did wrong" (whatever that was) he would be hit.

### **Summary and Discussion**

This discussion has considered how children perceive and manage their lives within the family. The family is the context in which abuse takes place, but this occurs within a complex of relationships between themselves and the parent. Throughout these accounts, children have related common experiences of abuse,

although clearly this is to understand abuse in the way I depicted it in the conclusion of the previous chapter.

In the interviews with the children in groups, I drew attention to what I called the "privacy control mechanism". I noted that children in groups were willing to divulge only the most 'bland' pieces of information in front of others. This may be interpreted as an early manifestation by the child of the struggle to maintain the privacy of the family, so that a 'front' is preserved.

In the process of setting up the interviews with the individual children, I also drew attention to the numbers of organisational obstacles that were apparent; these acting as a barrier to any easy access to talking with children. I saw this as "the ideology of paternalism" since it was predicated (seemingly) on two beliefs. Firstly that adults experience great anxiety if they are not in a position to monitor what children said. Secondly the belief that if children were to talk about their painful experiences, this would lead to further trauma. I suggested that such control over children, in practice protected the adult world.

The children I interviewed often showed contradicting and conflicting views of family life. They might fantasise for a better family, or parents that didn't fight, or abandon them, or abuse them, but were, at the same time positive about children's homes (Stacey, Josie, Andrew and Bob). Some children expressed a

dislike of being fostered (Josie and Stacey). All these children were in care.

Bob and Josie both wanted a "proper" family or a "normal" family, yet Bob also rejected living with his mother, as did Kelly. Children who were fostered were only able to make sense of their abuse there by perceiving themselves as outsiders, as not being the real children of the family. There was an unexamined belief that families consisted only of parents and their children. Yet only two of the children I talked with actually lived in a 'natural' family in the sense of the nuclear family with both their own parents and two children (George and David). Most lived with a single parent, their father had left, there had been a divorce or they were in a foster home or a children's home.

It was apparent from my conversation that children were also powerless. The exploitation by the adult world crossed over from the institution of the family and was again experienced in their relationships with social workers. Both the family and social workers made arrangements about where children should live with apparently little thought as to how it might affect the child. The most shocking example of this was Antonia's experience, whose relatives 'drove round' the block to make up their minds, while she and her brother waited.

Not only were children not consulted, they were not heard if they complained. This had certain effects on their identity. Della

was confused. She seemed to question her own perception. Was she lying or wasn't she? Was she ill-treated or wasn't she? Antonia had just retreated. Moved about like a piece of property between her mother, her step-father and her grandparents, she had learnt passivity and acceptance. Both girls it could be said, were learning to be feminine, they were learning to accept the decisions made for them and about them, and this lesson was first initiated in the family.

It also seemed a sense of self and a sense of gender which differed from stereotypes, developed within conflict and opposition. Those children with the strongest sense of who they were and what they wanted to be, had been given space or had struggled and won space to resist, whether psychic, intellectual or geographical. This resistance would start with a critique of their parents' behaviour and values, and from this it seemed they moved naturally to a critique of society. Children who opposed, who criticised, appeared to have a surer grasp of the rights and wrongs of society. There was a relationship between their personal experiences of conflict and contradiction in the family and their politics. There was a clarity about them which was lacking in the other children (Simon, Ian, Andrea, Catherine).

The most dominated children, in the sense that they had no clear sense of a separate identity from their parents, were probably those who to the outside world were the most integrated in the family. No criticisms were allowed by themselves of their family

or their parents. They tended to idealise their parents, to rationalise abuse as being due to their bad behaviour, and to see it as being love and affection (George, Antonia).

The majority of children were however somewhere between these two extremes. They were struggling to make sense of their world, often on their own or with the help of their friends. They would fluctuate between angry rejection, between a startling insight, to a collusive and sometimes destructive or painful identification with their parent.

The relationship between girls and their mothers, whether in care or not, seemed particularly prone to this. Girls found it difficult, because painful, to perceive their mother's stated preference for their brothers. This seemed particularly disturbing in that a gendered self was constructed within the family that was predicated though unacknowledged, on being second best (Debbie, Stacey, Antonia). So in the family what was a disadvantage to the girls, became an advantage to the boys. At the same time they internalised values that prioritised boy's needs as predominant and that family life was to revolve around the male.

The final section discussed abuse and punishment as understood and experienced by the child. It was understood as the experience of pain, anguish and exploitation and can be seen as part of the



pattern of domination, exploitation and control woven into the patriarchal capitalist family.

There is thus a relationship between abuse as I understand it and what, in the everyday sense, would be classified as punishment. It is common for parents to hit children as punishment. In the every day, it seemed punishment is regarded as legitimate (Straus et al. 1981, Tutt 1976). Parents hit children because they want to punish them and punishing is a way of controlling and containing a child as well as hurting them. The need to hurt the child is an important part of punishment, otherwise would it not be better to talk through with the child the circumstances of the offending situation?

The Oxford Dictionary defines a punitive act as that inflicting punishment. To punish is an act of retribution, of revenge with the intention of hurting or injuring. What is the relationship between abuse and punishment? Punishment is an abusive act. It may be a particular category of action, with a definite beginning and end. On the other hand it may permeate the atmosphere, enter into the minutiae of everyday relationships. Punishment when defined as an event may seem easier to understand than abuse. The perpetrator acts with intention, though they may not be aware of the intention, and therefore deny it. The intention is to hurt the child because the child did wrong. Punishment can thus, according to the perpetrator, be ultimately justified. The child

deserved the punishment and punishment, it is thought, will deter the child from offending again.

Punishment also effects the perpetrator. In the act of hurting, the adult is confirmed as exercising a legitimised power and domination. The exercise of the power is however restricted by the child. As a child grows older and therefore bigger and comes to define physical punishment as assault, it is less likely the adult will strike a child. Statistically cases of physical abuse are more prevalent amongst younger children (NSPCC 1987) and three times more likely to be inflicted on girls (DHSS Survey of Child Protection, Nov. 1988). As the child therefore increases in size and maturity, the child is more likely to strike back. This is not so likely for girls, who have been taught and therefore internalised passivity and acceptance. Hence adults are constrained to hit the smaller, younger, vulnerable child, or female child, since they cannot defend themselves. In this, gender and generational oppression are constructed.

However a parent who hits, smacks and slaps a child is not condemned unless the child's body exhibits visible signs of damage. The definition of punishment which is legitimate and abuse which is not, is organisationally negotiated (4). It is unlikely that a single act of punishment, an assault on a child, will be defined as abuse. It will be seen as an isolated act. The parent lost control because of the child's provocation. A severe beating can be similarly defined. Although this is also a

form of abuse, it may become defined and categorised as an offence. The punishment then becomes a legal category of assault, either actual bodily harm or grievous bodily harm. The parent may be cautioned or prosecuted.

Underlying all three forms of parental behaviour, of ways of relating to children, whether punishment, abuse or assault, there is the same underlying motive. The child must suffer and generally speaking it is generally acceptable. Punishment thus becomes separated off from abuse, in the everyday understanding, since hitting children in the family is legitimated. The parent has the right to injure the child, whether physically or emotionally, and the privacy of the family and the attitudes of society in seeing the child as the property of the parent, protects that right.

If a child has a consciousness or awareness of abuse, seeing it as unjust, then it is possible to oppose it. The child cannot resist before they have an awareness of this, for to know it, necessarily precedes its negation. This consciousness depends on a rejection of the mystification of the adult world, the adult world having the legitimated power of definition; this is punishment, this is abuse. A rejection of this mystification gives space, psychic and emotional, which enables a clarity of thought to develop. If the child was able to perceive of this and to react with anger, then they were able to reject their role as victim, to act with consciousness, to transcend the abuse of family life.

This chapter has discussed the views of the family and of childhood, largely from the perspective of the child. The following chapter subjects their interpretations and those on child abuse as depicted in Chapter 5 to a critical analysis. I propose an alternative way of understanding abuse, and situate it within the theoretical approach of critical theory, arguing that child abuse has a certain part to play in the maintenance of the social order.

## CHAPTER 7 - NOTES

1. I have attached in the Appendix virtually the full interview with Andrea. The flow of conversation was typical of the best of the interviews. Although Andrea was still only 13, she had determination and intelligence that survived, despite her experience of abuse.
2. A metaphor is a symbol which represents something else. It is known within literature, but it is also used to develop an understanding of the unconscious within psychoanalytic analysis. Here the metaphor is seen as a symbol which represents the unconscious substitution for some disturbing or unpleasant thought with another concept, image or interpretation which is more acceptable.

So to use the example of Bob, his mother clearly viewed him as malevolent, destructive and powerful. This became substituted with the idea that the food was bad and it was Bob's power that could turn food bad.

3. Statistics bear this out. See Creighton, NSPCC 1984.
4. See the discussion in Dingwall et al (op. cit.) which considers this point in their analysis of Case Conference proceedings.

## PART IV

### CHILD ABUSE AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER

#### CHAPTER 8

#### RECONCEPTUALISING CHILD ABUSE THROUGH CRITICAL THEORY

##### Introduction

This thesis has been an investigation into the nature of child abuse, a consideration of why child abuse is so prevalent, and an exploration into its relationship with the social order. Using the perspective of critical theory, the discussion has moved from an examination of how child abuse is woven into the fabric of everyday family life as this incorporates structural considerations of patriarchy (to do with gender), alienation (to do with class) and mystification (to do with the obfuscation) of the sources of domination and control, to how the child experiences abuse. Hence Part I laid the theoretical and methodological foundations to the research.

Part II was a critical examination of family life and child abuse, and a review of current literature. Part III focused on the

child's account of family life, and considered how experiences of abuse were this were expressions of the hierarchy of generation and gender.

Part IV, the final section, develops these themes. Chapter 8 uses the perspective of critical theory, as exemplified in Chapter 2, to reconceptualise child abuse, and Chapter 9 considers how this preliminary and alternative understanding of child abuse can be operationalised. This is firstly in terms of subjecting the conceptual model to further research, and secondly a discussion of how social work practice may be changed.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how critical theory advocates a critical analysis of the beliefs that society may hold of itself. A critical analysis develops out of the process of self-reflection on the relationship between what is known by one self and what is observed, experienced and conceptualised by the other. Through this self-reflection a greater depth of understanding may be gained and the potential for transforming the present pain and suffering contained within present childcare practice, may be realised.

Hence this chapter discusses how child abuse may be reconceptualised in terms of seeing its relationship to the social order. I discuss, from the perspective of critical theory, beliefs about the family - that the family is by and large a benevolent institution, that the abuse of children is unacceptable - how present explanations of child abuse mislead in terms of failing to

distinguish between choice and necessity, and what forms of praxis (if any) are open to children. I draw on the comments of children to illustrate my discussion. Finally I conclude with an interpretation of family life as part of the social order, how child abuse is part of childcare, and how childcare reflects the experiences of domination and subordination.

### **Beliefs about the Family**

Beliefs about the family's benevolence, stability, 'naturalness' and its acceptability as a preferred way of life abound. Sprey comments that even a casual glance at the literature on the family indicates to the social scientist the concept of stability is more than just an analytical tool. It is seen as a 'desirable and normal' state of affairs (Sprey 1969 p.699). Barrett and McIntosh write that while the stereotypical nuclear family accounts for only a third of all households, there is a prevalent belief that almost the entire population is bound up with it. They see the ideology of the family as therefore even stronger in terms of its influence, than its structure in terms of numbers would indicate. Both the left and the right claim to represent the interests of the family. They call this interest in, and ideology about families, 'familialism' (Barrett and McIntosh 1982). Morgan observes that the institution of the family permeates Conservative thinking. Citing Ferdinand Mount's "The Subversive Family" (1982) written by a leading Conservative theoretician, he notes that Mount perceives



the family as an effective opposition to totalitarian thinkers of all kinds (Morgan 1985 p.159).

Mount was 'the moving figure' behind the Conservative establishment of a Family Policy Study Group in 1983. In a leaked report to the Guardian in February 1984 a number of themes were put forward for consideration. That mothers should be encouraged to stay at home, that the committee should examine what could be done for the family to reassume responsibilities taken on by the State, for example, unemployed sixteen year olds. That children should be encouraged to manage their pocket money, and to encourage banks and schools to look for further ways to promote 'savings'. To examine ways in which social workers and teachers tend to undermine individual responsibility, and to promote a vigorous voluntary sector, especially those which rely on volunteers or self-help, were amongst some of their suggestions. (1) The family is therefore pivotal to Conservative economic and political thinking. As Sir Keith Joseph has said, the family must be at the centre of their thinking, since a large part of production and services come from family firms which are the backbone of economic and community life (cited in Loney 1986 p.30).

The Study Commission on the Family (1982) also quotes survey evidence as consistently ranking the family as an essential element of individuals' lives, and crucial for personal satisfaction, happiness, contentment and psychological well being.

The importance of the stability of the family as an institution, particularly for the right, is thus clear, but is it 'benevolent', in the way categorised in the preceding paragraph? A brief review of some recent empirical data on the family - the rising numbers of single parents, the rising rates of reported child abuse and the prevalence of domestic violence - suggests not.

There is substantial statistical evidence that there has been an increase in the numbers of families headed by a single parent, this apparently indicating a rejection by many of the traditional two parent family. For example, between 1971 and 1984 the numbers of single mothers rose from ninety thousand to one hundred and eighty thousand, a 100% increase. During the same period the figures for divorced women with children rose at an even greater rate, from one hundred and twenty thousand to three hundred and seventy thousand, a 300% increase. During the 70's and 80's the proportion of lone parents with dependent children rose from 8% of all families in 1972 to 14% in 1985. Most of this increase was accounted for by increasing numbers of families headed by single and divorced women (OPCS 1986).

The statistics on child abuse as defined by the NSPCC hardly show the family to be an arena for love and care, especially if one considers their reports refer only to known and reported cases. For example their figures show a 47% increase in the reported rate of physical abuse to children from 1977-1982. Between October 1984 and 1985, over 13,000 new cases were referred of whom 1,430

children were added to the Child Abuse Register, and in the large majority of such cases, the main abuser is the male (NSPCC 1986).

And research on domestic violence in the home (men attacking women) points out that its incidence is neither recorded nor published in any meaningful way, so figures represent a substantial understatement. For example, in the Islington Crime Survey undertaken by Middlesex Polytechnic Centre of Criminology, it was found that 22% of all assaults were by men on women with whom they had a present or past relationship. The level of violence showed that 92% of women in the survey were punched and slapped, 57% kicked, 22% used weapons such as bottles, glasses, knives, sticks and clubs (London Strategic Policy Unit 1986 p.7). The report states that it is likely only the more serious of assaults were reported to interviewers and that the survey did not pick up on the everyday harassment that women are subjected to in the home (Ibid p.8).

Such evidence as this therefore contradict beliefs that family life necessarily represents stability and care. There is an underside to families that is concealed since it is in conflict with what Conservative thinking would have us believe. Yet it seems that a large proportion of the population do not to live in the traditional two parent family, and it is possible that given real choices, even more would opt for alternative forms of living. Furthermore the evidence indicates that violence, particularly of

its crudest physical form, is prevalent, whether one considers men assaulting women or parents assaulting children.

But how do children perceive family life? In my interviews, children seemed to show a far less dogmatic adherence to the benefits of family life, and this was particularly true of those who had experienced alternatives to the family, such as children's homes. I am not arguing here for children's homes as alternatives to the family, but making the point that contrary to adult beliefs, children are not hostile to children's homes. For example,

"The family was a bad influence on him, it was keeping him back. He could have gone far, but his family was keeping him back. Now he's been in care in a home for about a year and a half. He's got really good qualifications... It's turned out really good for him."

(Simon)

"Some need to be away from their parents, as well as with their parents. I go to my mum and stay there for the first weekend in every month and when I get back from there, the Monday afterwards, my dad comes down for his visit. So I've got a fun packed weekend...."

(Andrea in a Children's Home)

"She started picking on me, getting her daughter to do things. I ran away. I wanted to go in a children's home. I like being in a children's home because I like helping the little ones. I've been through a lot and I understand their problems."

(Josey in a Children's Home)

What kind of conclusions is it possible to make from such comments? It would seem that as critical theory would argue, people who persist in holding conventional beliefs about the family, despite evidence that contradicts, are not choosing 'freely'. They have chosen from within an environment of limited opportunities, in

circumstances where they have been unduly influenced, or in conditions of ignorance or false belief. And the 'undue influence' argument would seem even more pertinent today given the gradual erosion of the Welfare State, the increasing promotion of privatised services for children, for the elderly and the handicapped. In such circumstances any critique of the family, which would expose its incorporation of abuse, domination and repression would seem even more difficult to countenance given the present government's ideological and material promotion of it.

I wish now to consider another belief: that is that abuse in the family is unacceptable. I earlier argued against the distinction this society made between abuse and punishment, the latter category being seen as acceptable, whereas abuse is not. I argued that this was a mystification and enabled a good/bad split to be established between those who punish and those who abuse. Parents who abuse were unacceptable and could be pathologised as being different from the rest of us. They could also be simultaneously classified as representing a small minority. What if, however, we refused to accept such a distinction, and switched the power to define child abuse from the adult world to the child. What would be the consequences?

Childline, the recent free telephone counselling service established for children, gives some indication of the numbers of children who, given the opportunity, can and do protest. Newspapers report an average of approximately 8,000 calls a week

from children requesting help. Even if one arbitrarily defined half of these requests for help as 'trivial', the numbers of children needing help is large.

But what of the adult world's response? The following commentary on Childline is taken from an article in The Times. It illustrates points made earlier: unease at the child's view coming out in the open, anxiety that intra-family life is exposed to public view, and indignation that the child may have a view that does not accord with the popular mythology about family life. It is another example of the 'privacy control mechanism', and incorporates, again, the ideology of paternalism.

The writer begins by stating her 'uneasiness' about Childline. She sees there to be a 'problem'. What is this problem? Firstly she writes that she neither has any understanding of or sympathy for child abusers, commenting that "hanging is too good for them". She then goes on to say that it could result in the State "passing judgement on mother's sanctions for poor homework". The State should only interfere when there is "real child abuse", otherwise parents will be "under seige" for a whole range of private parenting concerns. And what of her attitudes to children? She writes, "You plant the idea in people from early childhood that if they are afraid in the dark, or have a problem with a bully, they just telephone the state. Is there anything more destructive to the family as a unit or in its relationship with the community as

having outsiders brought in willy nilly to solve matters where no laws are broken?" (The Times 5.11.1986)

The writer thus encapsulates in her comments a number of general ideological statements about the family and children's position in it. She makes no reference to the child's view. They are written out. She appears to have no concern about their consciousness. She trivialises their problems, "homework, being afraid of the dark, bullying". She distinguishes between "real abuse" and other abuse. She states that parenting is private, and that no law has been broken, thus implying that children can be beaten since this is not real abuse. Yet she does not begin to address the problem of what she sees as "real abuse", thus her views remain at the level of rhetoric.

Other research has also noted the invalidation of the child's protest at abuse. This is particularly true of sexual abuse (Herman 1981; Forward and Buck 1981; Nelson 1982; Kempe 1984).

And if one refuses to accept the distinction between abuse and physical punishment, the picture of children's lives in the family becomes even more disturbing. The Children's Legal Centre in their submission to the DHSS Consultative Document on child abuse made the following points. That there is a very high incidence and frequency of physical punishment of children and young people, as documented in a large scale research study by Elizabeth and John Newson of the Child Development Research Unit at Nottingham

University. That children are the only members of this society who are not protected from physical assault. That there is a fine continuum between 'reasonable physical chastisement' and serious child abuse (Children's Legal Centre 1986).

There is then a contradiction between society's expressed attitudes on child abuse and what actually happens about it. These attitudes can only be maintained by making a distinction between abuse and punishment, yet the motives behind both sets of actions are largely the same. As I have argued, abuse and punishment are means of controlling and dominating, and at the same time the adult world can act out legitimately their pain, anger and frustration on children who are perceived in an objectifying and reified way. The parent-child relationship is primarily based on this. Children are not valued in their search for autonomy and their independence is not respected.

It is necessary that they learn to be dominated, to be disciplined, not to question the authority of the parent, for only thus can the present system continue. The present system, the political economy, is also based on domination, control and authoritarianism. It has to be in order that its fundamental irrationalism and repression may continue. I am not arguing that the adult world is aware of this, that there is a conspiracy about the need to control. Rather I am arguing that this is unacknowledged, since it



is an unconscious motive. I am arguing also that such a motive when it becomes transformed into behaviour, via attitudes expressed towards children which hurt and damage them, whether psychically or physically, can only be understood within the context of the repressions and exploitations of this society.

The following give some examples of how the children in this study perceived their parents' pain, and how they struggled to relate this to their childhood, as it affected the present.

"My grandmother mustn't let any emotions out. I still see them and they don't talk about her and sometimes I feel a really bad atmosphere about. There's a photograph but no one talks about her."

(Simon struggling to understand his mother's abandonment)

"My dad seems to have become a workaholic.... He seems to be working crazy. He's trying to prove something."

(Simon on why his father had little time for him)

"Her parents wouldn't tell her anything.... She won't hide things, so if I ask a question, she'll tell me and she's not threatened by me at all."

(Ian understanding his mother)

"My dad's dad was awful to his wife. I don't think he cared much. He was a grown man but mentally immature. He'd take more interest in building a microscope, than being with his wife and son."

(Ian explaining the origins of his father's contempt for his mother)

"When she was 16, she came out of her foster home and she fell pregnant, and her nan made her have an abortion, and then when she met my dad she had me, but then my dad used to beat her up. The baby died of a cot death. He blamed her for not looking after the baby properly. He kept beating her up."

(Allen explaining how his mother had had a hard life and why she hit him)

"She's at work all day, and she gets up very early in the morning and she's out until four. My mum drinks a lot, she's not alcoholic, she's hardly ever in."

(Catherine on why her mother and she don't get on)

"My mum expects me to grow up as she didn't. She had to grow up, because her mum didn't have a lot of time for her. There was no time for her, because she was the only girl in the family."

(Andrea on her mother's attitudes to her)

"When my mum was young, she couldn't get away quick enough. Her parents really mistreated her. Her dad beat her up, hit her like me. She wouldn't cry and he'd hit her until she broke down and cried. Her dad took advantage of her while her mum was in hospital. And he did it almost every night. She kept all her clothes on, to make it more bearable. She wanted to get it over and done with."

(Bob on his mother)

Such accounts demonstrate with clarity those issues I have previously discussed. The relationships between men and women, the extent of exploitation derived from psychological and economic dependence, its mystification, and the privatised nature of family life. It indicates the effects these have on the family, which is forced because of its own ideology to turn in on itself, and thereby constructs a structural effect as the discontents and oppressions become reinforced and reproduced. Such accounts of family life expose as ideology the widespread and generalised beliefs in its benevolence. As a matter of fact such ideologies ensure a continuing split between 'bad' families (those seen as abusive) and 'good families' (those seen as caring) since it is only the 'bad' families through the intervention of the State which become opened up for public discussion. The 'good' families are able through the privacy control mechanism, the silencing of

children and their structural invisibility, to continue with the mythology of its benevolence. (2)

A third belief relating to explanations of abuse, are those which are based on 'causal' factors. These are the 'common sense' explanations, which are ultimately deterministic. They are deterministic because they do not include in their analysis the mediations of motivation, understanding or the intentions of the abuser. Such explanations are therefore 'causal', since there is an assumption that factor A (for example unemployment or stress or adverse early parenting) caused effect B (the abusing event). In this there is a failure to consider the opportunities for choice and that there is no inevitability. Such explanations depend ultimately for their understanding of the social and personal world on the methodologies of the natural sciences. They therefore refer to abuse as being 'caused' by 'bonding' failure, by stress, by unemployment, by poverty, or refer to cycle of deprivation theories, or that the parent was 'sick' - the medical model. But how did children understand their experiences?

If we consider Bob's case, a boy severely assaulted by his mother at the age of fourteen, there are a number of explanations as to why this occurred according to whose viewpoint is considered.

1. From his mother's viewpoint it was Bob who provoked her.  
"She thought I was winding her up. She thought I'd done the bad food in the fridge." She thought also that he had

assaulted himself. "She said I'm sure you did them, because when I went away, you had no bruises."

2. From Bob's perspective, "If my mum hadn't been rejected.... When my mum's sister died, my gran turned round and said that should have been you." And Bob had also referred to his mother having been raped by her father.

These events could be understood according to the 'cycle of deprivation' theory, yet this omits some important aspects. For example, clinical studies have shown (Rush 1980, Forward and Buck 1981), as does statistical evidence, that it is far more likely that girls are sexually assaulted than boys. There is a regularity of sexual and physical abuse, which is exemplified here by this single case. It is thus important to have an understanding also of the nature of gender relations as they relate to the wider society. Cycle of deprivation theories gloss over this; they therefore depoliticize an important part of power relationships within the family, and simultaneously fail to address the exploitation of children.

To take a second example, that of Andrea. Again there are several explanations. Andrea gives these as her understanding of why she was hit.

1. "She got married in Islam but because she was pregnant, they couldn't call it a marriage. So he used to beat me and my sister."

2. "... one day they were fasting, and they expected me to have nothing. I'd eaten a chewing gum and they started hitting."
3. "She'd been looking after the kids all day, because it was the holidays and the two babies were ill. He came in and told her to get the dinner on the table. She told him to wait a while. He started hitting her."
4. "Well after my stepdad left, things began to get out of order, because when my mum came to be a one parent family, she used to take things out on me. The more she took out of me, the more I took out on the little ones."
5. "There was no time for her, because she was the only girl in the family. She wants me to grow up thinking she's got loads of time for us."

The first explanation refers to the moral and religious codes of Islam. (3) Andrea's mother had, one presumes, brought shame to her husband. It was seen as her fault, not a joint mistake, but it was the children in the family who were actually to suffer for this.

The second explanation is related to this, that is the expectations that parents have for their children as they relate to their own unexamined beliefs. Since they were fasting, it seems, Andrea must also fast. She was offered no choice.

The third explanation refers to the male expectation of women's role in the family, and his determination that she should conform. She should have had the dinner ready for him and if she hadn't, then this justified him hitting her.

The fourth explanation refers to the extra stress and the responsibility of being a single mother without outside help. Andrea's mother blames her daughter, and Andrea in her turn takes out her mother's assaults on her on her younger siblings.

The fifth explanation refers both to her mother's own upbringing, and the way in which her mother now seeks to continue this domination by mystifying it. "She wants me to grow up thinking she's got loads of time for us." Using Andrea's account as a single case history, there is no reference in any form of 'bonding' failure either from the child or from the child's account of a parental explanation. There is no reference either to unemployment, poverty or housing problems, but there are extensive references to patriarchy, though not identified as such, and its expression via the domination and the control of children.

This may be compared with Debbie's account of her childhood. Debbie is not in care, but like Andrea she is the daughter of a single mother. Yet there are differences between them and I would like to explore why this should be so. Debbie says,

1. "There was only one bedroom and it was all cramped and we lived in one bedroom. My mum always had to go to cheap shops. She had to make do with what she got on the family allowances."
2. "She's been saving up. She's had cleaning jobs, anything, barmaiding, to get money and now she's managing alright."
3. "My dad was a terrible gambler, though he isn't now. My dad would spend all the money on horses."
4. "My mother's mother is a bad gambler as well; every weekday my brother phones up my nan to put on the horses for him. If he wins, he gives some to my nan."
5. "My mum's not brought me up, the way she was. My mum had a rough life."

According to the 'common sense' explanations of child abuse, most of the 'causes' are here: poverty, overcrowding, long hours and debts. Yet there is no abuse of children. Why? Debbie says that when her mother could no longer accept her husband's debts, she left him, taking the children with her. She says that her mother has a great honesty, and that her ideas of childcare are modelled on an admired sister-in-law. Debbie also notes her mother's recognition of her as a separate person and her ability to

recognise and to accept her differences. "We have our differences and she says, 'Oh you've got your views and I've got mine.'"

Thus although there are differences between Andrea and Debbie's childhood experiences, these relate less to structure and more to the definitions of the situation. Debbie's mother has an ability to reflect, to develop an awareness of herself as a separate person with the ability to exercise choices and act on them. She chose to leave her husband who gambled and took with her her two children to live in a two bedroomed flat. She did a variety of jobs and she modelled her care of her two children on another whom she admired. In effect her 'definition of the situation' enabled her to manipulate those choices within the limitations of the opportunities offered her. She refused therefore to be either dominated or reified by either her relationship with a man or by the system.

A fourth belief concerns society's attitudes towards children. Are they valued? I earlier referred to Berg's and Greer's observations of the low status of children in the West, and I argued that the child in the family was reified and silenced. Were these theoretical points borne out by what children had to say? What does valuing a child mean? How is it possible to begin to evaluate this?

Here I have taken it to mean that the child is loved and cared for, and is also liked, and that they are offered a similar respect that



one would offer a friend. That it would mean acknowledging a child's autonomy, differentness and growing independence. That such a relationship would not be based on domination and control, but rather in so far as it was possible and taking into account the child's ability to learn and understand, equality. I found this to be the case in some families, as in Simon's.

Simon felt able to object to his parents hitting him, and because of his objections, they stopped.

Ian felt respected by his mother: "She'll accept me. She won't get forceful about things. It's my mum who I look on as a parent." But he said of his father, "I sus out a lot of things he does and I think, are you really doing that for me. I don't respect my dad...." Consequently he defined his father as a "53 year old adolescent and that just about sums it up."

George talked about respect for his parents, but did they respect him? George was coerced to play football every night. It seemed that he was regarded by his father as an extension of himself.

Catherine was unable to talk to her mother. She was on the pill, she used lilletts, she went out with black boys, all against her mother's own views. Though this clearly upset Catherine because she would have preferred her mother's support, she refused to be subordinated. Catherine and her mother were in constant conflict.

Catherine felt she was constantly compared in an unfavourable light to her older sister.

Della's mother and stepfather concealed from her the truth about her father, so she thought her stepfather was in fact her real father.

Antonia's stepdad and stepnan "went round the block" while they decided whether they wanted her. There seemed no thought that perhaps Antonia had views of her own, and that she would have liked to be consulted. She was treated as if an object, and consequently, she didn't ask - she didn't like asking, she said.

Stacey was locked up in her room for days, and her foster mother used to hit her, but because she didn't get on with her social worker, she chose not to tell her. Stacey had no other person she could confide in. She was trapped and silenced.

Kelly was not wanted by her foster mother. When she had to leave, the social worker took her to a psychiatrist, because she thought "there was something wrong" with her. Kelly seemed not to know what this "something" was.

Such examples show the frequency of the devaluing of children. Children are likely not to be consulted, information is not shared with them, they are expected to obey their parents, no matter how petty the expectation is or how fundamental the issue. It is not

considered the child may have a different, but equally legitimate viewpoint.

### **States of Awareness**

Earlier I discussed the notion that critical theory sees as a form of knowledge, states of awareness. This awareness is a product of consciousness and consciousness predisposes that a process of demystification has occurred. That is, the individual has seen through the ideological explanations put forward which serve to maintain the status quo. Secondly and derived from this that an alternative conception of the social world provides a different understanding and can locate the source of suffering within a particular political and economic arrangement.

Taking the four categories of states of awareness as discussed in Chapter 1, I intend to consider them in the context of children's perception of family life.

The first category, where the individual is suffering and understands the source of that suffering, can be applied to Andrea and Simon. This is not to say that they have a developed theory, but they have moved beyond a purely individualist understanding to a structural analysis.

Andrea talks of the "problems" she has, she refers to the bruises on her arms, down her legs and her back where she was beaten. She recognises the relationship between being abused and taking things from her mother and her stepfather. She identifies that her life's experiences have made it difficult to fit into a foster family and she knows her anger. There is no denial of her experiences or of her suffering. She has reflected on them, acknowledged them and struggles to make sense of them.

She gives a series of explanations. The authority of her father's religion which structures, in a particularly rigid way, behaviour in terms of norms and rules. The expectations of fasting which therefore legitimated in his eyes his beating of her when she chewed gum. The expectations of her mother that it is Andrea's responsibility to look after the children and to do the work when her mother is out. The expectations of her stepfather that his wife should have 'the dinner on the table', regardless of her own timetable and work load.

Andrea has not pathologised her parents, although she is certainly very angry, but legitimately so. What she has identified is the ways in which social institutions, religion and patriarchy, through their practices of the everyday, control and define the quality of interpersonal relations. That the authority of the adult world can, within the family, within the parent-child hierarchy, dominate and punish the child for not conforming to the structures and beliefs of society.

Simon also was aware of his suffering. Abandoned by his mother at the age of three, he retained the pain of his early memories. He talks of his anger, of helping his mother to pack, that he used to cry for two hours and that he "felt all messed up inside". His anger was not because she was a lesbian, but at her having left. "I was just angry that she left because of that." How was this personal experience identified and acknowledged by him, translated into structural concerns? For Simon, the process of developing an awareness of his mother's sexuality and her problems in living with this (she had emigrated to the States) had led him to reflect on appearances. He could no longer accept, as other people seemed to do, what seemed real. His personal loss and the consequent understanding, that his mother wasn't heterosexual but lesbian, became mediated into an analysis of society. He said that as he got older he got more sceptical, and that he questioned more things, that he stood back and looked at things before he felt he did anything. He identified that people were drawing into their shells, that there was a "depression on the streets". He explained this by saying that the country was "going down the drain and that there was nothing people could do". He wondered whether he was ever going to get a job and whether he would have money to do things. He recognised that money brought freedom, freedom from poverty.

An individual may also suffer but have no awareness of its cause, or have a false theory. Josey is an example of this. She had had a number of disturbing experiences which arose out of parents'

conflicts, the death of her father, her mother's alcoholism, and her mother's violent relationship with a younger man. She speaks of going back and forth between foster parents and her parents, as they fought and then got back together again. She says of these experiences, "As I've got older, I've had a mental blockage. I've forgotten all about it."

What explanation does she have for her pain? In talking of her mother's boyfriend, who "smashed and wrecked the house", she says that the social worker "didn't bother to do anything". That if something could have been done, "things sorted out", then maybe the family would still have been together.

In saying this, Josey has effectively abdicated her mother of any responsibility for changing her circumstances. She has reduced her mother to the passive recipient of another's actions, which is a reflection of her mother's own being in the world. Similarly there is no understanding or criticism of the man who smashed and wrecked the house and therefore an acknowledgement of her mother's pain arising out of this.

A structural analysis would have focused on the relationship between male violence inflicted on women and its effects on both women and men to parent. There may have been considerations of the opportunities for avoidance and resistance - women's refuges and legal action, civil and criminal - but Josey's analysis remains at

the purely personal. If the social worker had done "something", the family would have still been together.

A third category is one where the individual appears content, but a closer analysis of their behaviour shows them to be suffering from hidden frustrations of which they are not aware. For example, Della, whom I met in her bedsitter. She was still in care. She appeared happy in that she was superficially bright and talkative. She too had been back and forth between her mother and foster parents, but this was a private arrangement, and Social Services became involved at a much later stage.

Della had no word of criticism about anybody or any institution. She seemed passively content with her life, despite her experiences of both physical and emotional abuse and rejection. She expressed no anger, she seemed to accept whatever life had to offer. Yet a closer consideration of what she said, and how she said things revealed a deep unhappiness and loneliness. It was Della who spoke in metaphors, the metaphors concealing from her the deep pain and confusions she experienced. For example, her ambivalence at returning to her mother was expressed in her talk about her school, "My mum wanted me to go back to school. I couldn't take going back to school. They didn't understand."

Her hurt and pain arising out of her own experiences, showed in her long account of her best friend who was repeatedly abused both

sexually and physically by her father. Talking about her was safer.

It was Della who in the course of the interview, without any warning, gave a detailed account of her attempt to kill herself, and her mother's reaction - to hit her across the face. Della had taken into herself her abuse and rejection, yet she seemed unable to acknowledge it. She was subjected to the stereotypes of gender, her femininity expressed itself via passivity, acceptance and gentleness, to the extent she was tyrannised. She was not able to assert her own anger and assertion, for she did not know it and therefore did not understand it, nor could she speak of it.

The fourth category is where the individual is content, but only because they have been prevented from developing certain desires which normally they would have done. Antonia seems to exemplify this state. Aged nine, she had been in care for two and a half years. She, like Della, had internalised feminine stereotypical behaviour, but her mother's inability to care for her had left her apparently unscathed. She explained her mother's rejection and unreliability as being due to sickness and to her lack of money, yet at the same time she talked of her mother's new car and new furniture. She seemed unable to make a connection between what was told her and what she observed which was in contradiction to that. She kept them separate and was allowed to do so, and therefore was part of a collusion in her own mystification.



Antonia had suffered as had Andrea, in that her mother had expected her to behave also like an adult woman (a mother), and to care for her young brothers. She had changed the nappies, prepared their breakfast and made her mother her tea. She had not been offered the opportunities that her brother had, whether he should return to their mother's or their gran's, and arising out of this, she saw herself as not wanted. She did not protest, for she was not given the opportunities or the choices. Consequently, she didn't ask things, because she didn't like asking.

Such examples from children have shown the different understandings that children have of their experiences, the continuities and the discontinuities between what actually happened and how they perceived them. It is clear that the authority of the adult world does also serve to conceal the source of the child's pain, for by silencing children there is an effective mystification, since it is only the voice of the powerful that can define the situation. Those children who can speak, were able to use this in their struggle to understand, which led them to resist the hegemony of the adult world in a variety of ways.

### **Forms of Praxis**

Fundamental to critical theory is the recognition that true emancipation can only occur through praxis, and praxis develops through the struggle to confront coercion and mystification. In so

doing there is the potential for the realisation of true interests. (4) Praxis therefore incorporates a number of elements. An awareness of suffering, the realisation of its relationship with the social structure, a rejection that it is inevitable linked with an alternative theoretical explanation, and the struggle to develop true interests. There is thus a continuum composed of different elements of awareness and knowledge. This struggle incorporates individual as well as collective action, since there is a necessary relationship between them.

In considering the potential for children to be engaged in a political struggle, it became apparent that the resistance of children was invariably individualised. For example, in the section on Resistances and Oppositions in Chapter 6, I referred to the fantasies of children which enabled them to maintain some semblance of control over their lives. Rob and Tom were examples, since they imagined themselves in a position of power of the parent. This enabled them to retaliate for the hurt they had experienced. Yet this can hardly be interpreted as praxis, for the conditions of coercion and repression continued. But it enabled them to survive. Similarly the resistance shown in children's play, which while confronting adult authority in a subversive way, cannot be said to change the hierarchical patterns of domination and control.

That is to say, the fundamental relationship between the parent and the child, which is based on generational inequality, remains the

same. It is, on the other hand, perhaps unrealistic to expect that this would happen, in that children are economically and physically dependent on the parent, and there are no voices in Britain which have a statutory basis to speak for the child apart from the Children's Legal Centre and NAYPIC, both voluntary funded agencies. This can be compared with, for example, the Children's Ombudsman as in Sweden, or the various state-funded agencies in America, who do speak for the child - as opposed to the parent, or to the family (Knitzer 1976 and 1982).

What then is open to children and young people? How can they effectively protest so that the material reality of their lives, the circumstances of oppression and domination begin to change? In considering this, there seemed some curious dimensions to it. From my reading of the autobiographies and in my interviews with children, there seemed no avenues of protest other than through Social Services. Yet within Social Services, it is rare for there to be an organised voice for children. There may be groups for adopters, for foster parents, for ex-psychiatric patients, for those with handicaps, but little apparently for children in care. It is true there are some groups for sexually abused children, but these are run on therapeutic lines and there is no explicit political analysis. The exceptions are groups run by feminists for incest survivors, but these lie generally outside the structures of the Social Services.

How do children then resist? May Hobbs refers to striking her abusing mother and that on being taken into care, she "told them everything". It is clear that she regards her involvement with the 'welfare' as a positive experience, since it meant for her the opportunity to return to her foster mother.

Andrea also hit back at her stepfather and her mother. She contacted the police for assistance, and like May Hobbs regarded her removal from home as a positive experience. She stated she liked to be near her home but with regular access to her parents.

Bob reported to the doctor with his injuries and he was able to use Social Services as a form of protection from his mother.

Della's social worker also supported her once she recognised Della's unhappiness.

Yet again none of these actions can be classified as the beginnings of a political protest, although it is possible that May Hobbes' early experiences formed the foundations for her later union militancy. As a potential form of praxis there is no further development. This would seem to be due to a number of factors, which relate both to society's attitudes to children and young people, and those structures which institutionalise and reinforce these attitudes. By society, I mean the adult world as comprised of parents, teachers, social workers etc. Children are seen as victims and as lesser versions of adults. They are therefore

persistently devalued and kept powerless. They are silenced in order that the adult world can define for them what is important. This has both a psychological and a political function. Indeed the psychology and the politics are interwoven and reinforce one another. Children are thus prevented from expressing an organised voice of protest, and there are no channels which are formally recognised as speaking for them. (5)

One of the problems is that in Britain, children and young people cannot normally apply to the court on their own behalf, and they are not entitled, as of right, to participate when decisions are made about themselves or their relationships with their parents (Children's Legal Centre 1986).

Such archaic practices may be compared with an Australian case whereby a 15 year old boy in Melbourne successfully demanded a place in a Social Services home on the grounds that he did not get on with his parents. He complained that his parents argued too much and stopped him seeing his friends. His mother blamed the law which "allows any spoilt brat to take his parents to court just for making him eat his brussels sprouts".

The boy was able to act under Section 34 of the Community Welfare Services Act which proposed that "serious and irreconcilable conflict" between child and parent can be a ground for official

intervention in the family. This is analogous to the concept of "irretrievable breakdown" in divorce (Childright March 1987).

#### **What the Family needs to Represent and what the Parent needs to Represent**

An understanding of parental domination and control is essential in considering the dynamics of the patriarchal capitalist family. Domination and control not only underlines and informs abuse and coercion, but it also prevents its recognition. It is not recognised either by the perpetrator or the victim. This is what is meant by mystification. Yet mystification in the family informs the present social and political order. Mystification orientates one's perception of the social world and categorises and evaluates what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In the case of violence, assault and pain perpetrated by one person on another, it is mystification that informs one category of action to be judged as acceptable, to be defined as punishment or as retribution, and another which becomes defined as abuse.

Mystification is first experienced and internalised in the family. It is embodied by the parents' legitimated authority to control, to punish, to discipline and to define the situation. In defining the situation certain psychological tactics are used. These psychological tactics become political strategies outside the family. Learning to conform to parental authority and submit to

their control and definitions of the situation, lay the foundations for future conformity and submission to political authority and that definition of the situation.

So if we examine explanations and discussions of the experience of abuse, however so defined, we see as likely that the powerful will deny the validity of another view. There will be claims that their experiences are illusory and that really they have not suffered. Or it may be said to be due to 'the system' and because of this it is not possible to act otherwise. There is in this a dehumanisation of themselves so the structure becomes hegemonic to the extent it appears the individual cannot act with intention, to oppose and to negate. Since it is experienced in this way it becomes represented in this way, and there is an ultimate submission of themselves in it.

Alternatively it may be claimed as to be in the person's "own good", on the grounds that learning to submit enables one to survive. Yet survival may also mean becoming of the system and therefore becoming identified with a system that is basically repressive and abusive. (6) Hence the woman identifies with the man, the abused child with the abusing parent, the seduced with the seducer, the colonised with the coloniser, the man with the organisation, the people with the military war machine. The arguments are the same; the psychology becomes ideology, the personal becomes political.

Since parents, acting with intention or not, mystify the source of domination, control and abuse, certain important functions of the family are not revealed for what they are; for example, the irrationality and the injustice of patriarchy, as the following writers argue.

Weber writing on the authority of religious structures states that patriarchy is by far the most important type of domination, the legitimacy of which rests upon tradition. Patriarchy means the authority of the male, the father, the husband, the senior of the house, the oldest brother etc. It rests on a system of norms and rules which are considered sacred, and which if infringed result, it is believed, in magical or religious evils. Authority in such a system is exercised according to personal whim or to arbitrariness, according to the "favour of the lord" (Gerth and Mills 1970 p.296).

And in Reynaud's critique of patriarchy and masculinity he comments on its immense power in everyday life which both governs and yet conceals the source of its own origins. He refers to the power of the father over the son.

Faced with the weakness and obvious ignorance of the child, the father does not give information, nor does he formulate an opinion: he decrees and enforces a sentence; he uses his strength and his knowledge as the instruments and justification of his power. He sees in his son the mirror of his own dependence and he wants to make him into an image of his own success: through his son he can avenge his own childhood and make him the counterbalance to the share of humiliation he endures every day.

(Reynaud 1983 p.99) (my emphasis)



Elsewhere he observes that man as "daddy" is the reassuring side of patriarchal power, both symbolically and in reality. Having created a "reign of terror" "daddy" then comes forward to protect women from the others.

Man does not acquire a woman only by 'protecting' her, he also provides for her. Daddy is generous, he feeds and houses; but underneath this magnanimous exterior - which he sometimes emphasises - he is, in reality, concealing his attempts to prevent a woman surviving unless she serves him.

(Reynaud 1983 p.73)

Such submission to the patriarchal family has implications for the social and political order. The child is prepared for the authority and the domination of capitalism. The child does not perceive its injustice nor its irrationality, and neither, because of this, is the child able to transcend either the personal, the family, or the social and political experience. It becomes as if it could not be anything other.

In their massive study of the authoritarian personality, Adorno et al. came to a similar conclusion. They found that submission to parental authority was closely related to submission to authority in general. They wrote,

The high scoring men not only submit to discipline and punishment because there is no other choice left, but often find themselves in complete agreement with the administration of harsh punishment. They identify themselves with the punisher and even seem to enjoy punishment... during their adult life the idea of punishment and the fear of it stays with them, often preventing them from transgressing a narrow path of seeming virtue.

(Adorno et al. 1950 p.351)

The same researchers found that contempt for the allegedly weak and inferior was found together with an orientation towards power. The researchers saw this as having been taken over from parental attitudes towards children. The child's helplessness was exploited by the parent, and the child became forced into submission. There was often also a "rigid glorification and idealization" of the parent (Ibid. p.385). Sons of fathers who were represented as domineering, had tendencies of passive submission, as well as holding to the ideal of aggressive and rugged masculinity. Such families had tended towards conventional and rigid conceptions of sex roles.

They conclude that the parent-child relationship is significant in the establishment of prejudice and intolerance. That a hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative parent-child relationship is carried over into a political philosophy and a social outlook which leaves no room except for a clinging onto the strong, and a disdainful rejection of the weak and vulnerable (Ibid. p.973).

Thus what the family needs to represent and what the parent needs to represent is a continuation of the mystification of patriarchy. Patriarchy as representing the ethos of present day capitalism, its dehumanisation and objectification, and its repression of need in the constant drive for profit, which is in effect, meaningful within that system. So if children cannot see their own persecution, their own abuse and the irrationality of their daily lives, they will similarly not become aware of their true needs,

and neither will they recognise the irrationality and the exploitation of the political and economic sphere.

This chapter has preposed an interpretation of how the social order influences childcare practice in general and child abuse in particular. I have subjected beliefs about the family and about childcare to a critical analysis, and argued that as presently constituted, they contribute to maintaining the present order.

The following and final chapter moves away from these general issues and considers firstly, how such an interpretation may be 'tested' in terms of developing sociological theory and secondly, how one's own childcare practice may be changed in line with the arguments and orientations advocated here.

## CHAPTER 6 - NOTES

1. Britain in 1988 has seen the development of many of these proposals.
2. As I wrote this chapter, the findings of the Cleveland Inquiry were published. Media attention once more focused its outrage on the mistakes of the system, but their wrath was directed in particular at two women, Dr Marietta Higgs, the paediatrician, and Sue Richardson, the child abuse consultant, who "conspired" with her to remove children "dragging and screaming" from their "innocent" parents.

In contrast there was little attention given to examining the prevalence of sexual abuse of even very young children, and how preventative and treatment services could be set up. Dr Higgs pointed this out in an interview in "The Guardian", July 9th 1988:

"There has certainly been a lot of publicity about the outrage against professionals, against what has happened to families and to parents, but I must admit as far as children are concerned there has been very little outrage expressed against the sexual abuse of children and that really is the key issue."

3. Although Islam is here represented as repressive, quite clearly any other religion or set of beliefs has the same potential if over-zealously applied.
4. I discuss the concept of true interests in Chapter 2.
5. There are two exceptions, The Children's Legal Centre which is a campaigning body representing children's legal rights, and The National Association for Young People in Care. This is a voluntary organisation, but since it is not a body recognised by the government or any other major funding body, its existence remains precarious. Nevertheless it is run by young people for young people in care and is a powerful and alternative voice for their needs.
6. Alice Miller has devoted two extensive studies to exploring this relationship (1983, 1985).

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION: ISSUES OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN CHILDCARE

#### Introduction

The previous chapter discussed an interpretation and an exploration of childcare from the perspective of critical theory. This chapter explores how these initial interpretations may be developed. It is in two parts. Firstly it discusses how the conceptual framework derived from my investigation into the nature of child abuse may be researched in terms of developing hypotheses from the data: of theory, reflections from experience, and the child's viewpoint. It uses as a starting point, Weber's notion of the Ideal Type as applied to the patriarchal capitalist family, and delineates three conceptual areas in relation to child abuse: patriarchal power, patterns of domination and control, and forms of resistance.

Secondly, I discuss how the interpretations derived from within critical theory may inform a different childcare practice, in terms of confronting violence, privacy and mystification. The case of the death of Jasmine Beckford is reassessed, and an alternative way of interpreting this family is suggested. This is followed by a discussion of how violence in the family may begin to be contained,

by drawing on the experiences of both statutory and voluntary agencies in Canada. The thesis concludes with a summary of the main political and personal points developed throughout the process of this work.

### **Theory and its Application to Research**

In Chapter 5, I argued that present theoretical explanations of child abuse have no clear consensual boundaries. There are a multitude of explanations and conflict as to what is child abuse. To compensate for this nebulousness there is an overriding concern with a search for definitions. It is because of this, that this thesis has been undertaken in the 'context of discovery'.

Glaser and Strauss advocate that sociological theory is ultimately derived from an analysis of data, which illustrates certain points. Yet generating theory in this way is a process, and sources of ideas which inform the theoretical explanation will also come from outside the data, from the researcher's own everyday life. This process of understanding, relating and developing is therefore not merely logical, but also phenomenological and holistic. (Glaser and Strauss 1967)

What did generating theory mean here in the 'context of discovery'? As noted before my sample was not statistical, and there was no claim that it was representative. The sample was theoretical, that

is the data derived from themes constructed from the autobiographies and interviews was examined in a comparative way in the light of certain sociological principles. However my choice of general sociological principles drew on those from within a critical perspective. I chose Marxist and feminist accounts, rather than parental pathological models, environmentalist arguments or family dysfunctional systems. I chose these because they were capable of considering the dialectic between the structural and the personal, in a way that the other approaches are not capable of doing.

The interviews with the children represented their experience and provided the data which enabled the development of substantive theory. Substantive theory is theory developed from an empirical area of sociological enquiry (child abuse), and stands midway between common-sense explanations and 'grand theory'. Substantive theory is a strategic link in the formulation and the generation of grounded formal theory, but to move forward to formal theory requires further work.

Glaser and Strauss write that substantive and formal theory differ from each other only in terms of degree. They are both "middle range" in that they stand between what they call "minor working hypotheses" of everyday life and grand theory. Grand theory denotes and categorises societal functioning at a high level of abstraction. Both substantive and formal theories must be grounded in data. They develop from the study of an empirical situation,

using particular sociological perspectives and with a focus on a general question or problem. Hence substantive theory helps generate new grounded formal theory. By formal theory is meant that developed from a conceptual area of sociological inquiry. (Ibid p.33) Hence here the area of research needs further exploration of the patriarchal capitalist family.

The substantive data therefore needs to be verified by application to other empirical data, which draws on the conceptual framework developed in the 'context of discovery'. In this way theory becomes modified, differences will become fewer, the conceptual framework becomes more abstract as non-relevant properties are removed. This further testing of the evidence does not invalidate or destroy the theoretical model, but rather modifies it in the light of a further questioning of different data.

How can this be done? My discussion of the patriarchal capitalist family has been in a generalised and abstracted form. In order that theory may develop in the way Glaser and Straus advocate, the attributes of this type of family need delineating. Here it is possible to draw on the work of Weber who argued for the use of a methodological tool he called the Ideal Type. The Ideal Type formulates in a conceptually pure form sociological explanations of behaviour. Its usefulness can only be judged in terms of its results in the process of developing a clearer understanding and as an aid to formulating hypotheses (Eldridge 1972 p.81).



Weber termed this methodological concept an "Ideal Type". Ideal does not imply any evaluation but is rather an abstraction or a pure case, which is comprised of "controlled and unambiguous" conceptions. Thus an "Ideal Type" is neither a description nor a hypothesis, but is used to aid both descriptions and explanations. Its purpose is to facilitate the analysis of empirical questions, which may then modify and sharpen the empirical analysis of concrete problems, and in turn increase the precision of the analysis (Giddens 1974 p.142). The following, therefore, is a discussion of the patriarchal capitalist family as an Ideal Type. It can be seen to incorporate three elements: patriarchal power, patterns of domination and control, and forms of resistance.

#### **Patriarchal power**

Using this theoretical framework, I shall argue there is a relationship within the family which relates the behaviour and attitudes of capitalism as they are experienced by the adult world, to the control and domination of children. This occurs within the context of the child's struggle to confront and to resist parental power. Within the family, the parent seeks to establish in their relationship with the child, a control and domination they themselves lack. In this, the child becomes objectified, for they come to contain within this transaction, parental pain, frustration and objectification. The patriarchal relationship is therefore typified by expressions of power and authority. Activity within the family will be orientated towards the male's needs, wishes and

desires and this power is legitimated for it will be seen as the rightful state of affairs.

At the same time parents will inculcate in the child expected and stereotypical forms of gender behaviour. Girls will be expected to be submissive, compliant, warm and sensitive. Boys will be taught to be strong, assertive and aggressive. Toys, games, pastimes, clothes and conversations will reinforce this aim.

Any anger, dislike, stress etc that is experienced by the parent will be externalised onto the child. Because the child is comparatively powerless and physically smaller and thus weaker, they have little choice but to internalise this.

Control over the child may be expressed in terms of rules, habits and rituals and these may be seen as ends in themselves for they reinforce the parents' power. Parental power thus expresses traditional notions of authority, for there is a concern to maintain a particular order, rather than according to a body of principles. There is simultaneously a concern to maintain this control and authority free from outside intervention, a concern to privatise intra-family relationships.

#### Patterns of domination and control

Having delineated types of parental action in terms of values, emotions and rational behaviour, how can abuse be reconceptualised?

That is, how does the child experience abuse? Here I represent abuse as part of a pattern of the everyday. I therefore reject the organisational conceptualisation of abuse which sees it as either/or, and the child is either emotionally, physically, or sexually abused. Instead I understand abuse as part of a continuum, in that a fine line can be drawn between the 'typical' (domination, control and punishment) which is explained from the adult's point of view, and its more debatable and contentious forms. And since this debate is usually argued out within the adult world, the child's own view or understanding is rarely incorporated. So drawing on the work derived from the autobiographies and the interviews with children, I identified a number of categories of domination and control. I see these categories as abuse.

The child may therefore be excluded. This occurs where the child, physically, emotionally or intellectually is excluded from aspects of family life, and where there is no rational justification for this. It includes exclusion from conversations, information, mealtimes and from certain areas of the house. It may develop into rejection and neglect which is an extreme form of exclusion.

The child may be invaded. This includes both psychic and physical invasion, such as rape or sexual interference. Physical invasion will however also incorporate feelings of emotional and psychic invasion. Its mildest form is expressed by invading some areas which are special to the child, as for example re-arranging a

child's room, reading letters without permission or cross-examining friends for information without the child's knowledge.

Or the child may be punished. This is the most easily understood since it can be seen. Punishment ranges from taps, smacks, slapping, being hit with objects, throwing objects at a child, punching, pinching, kicking, cuffing, pulling hair or any other part of a child's anatomy, to sadistic forms of torture. It is a matter of debate as to the amount of social condemnation that such abuse will produce, although to a certain extent this is dependent on the visibility of the assault.

Some children may be manipulated. This is the heart of confusion and mystification. Such behaviour depends for its outcome on the parental use of persuasion and argument with the selective use of facts and experience. The child's experience may be denied or devalued. The child may be humiliated, or controlled with silences and looks, or there may be a feigned friendliness in order that the child may be manipulated. Its most destructive expression is where the child is placed in a double-bind to the extent there is a confusion to the point of psychosis.

But reifying the child is also common. The crucial element here is that the child is treated as though an object, and is thereby in the process dehumanised. In practice the adult acts towards the child as though they have no emotion, thought or potential to understand. They are not seen as separate from the parent, so the

parents' own projections of fear, anger or needs are projected on them. The child is thus understood as all powerful, all greedy or as insatiable. Reification denies and crushes a child's identity and autonomy.

These categories should be seen as an abstraction, for they set out in a clear and unambiguous way techniques of domination and control. It is useful in reflecting on these, to consider how these are part of the everyday in the context of relationships which incorporate inequalities. What is different about these as practised within families is the potential for enforcement because of the privatised nature of the family and the 'looping' effects that a child's resistance may produce. This seems inevitable given the repression of children's voice and therefore the limited opportunities for them to develop praxis. Children do however resist, as we have seen, and the following elaborates on their forms of resistance.

#### **Resistance: avoidance and opposition**

Resistance is part of the dynamic between parent and child. It is a response to an abusing relationship and is a way of managing parental domination and control. Though the underlying motive is to enable the child to survive by whatever means are appropriate, in that process the child may also reproduce dominating, controlling or violent reactions. Hence resistance is never pure for it contains its own contradictions, and the child's ensuing

struggle may succeed only in escalating the violence contained within the family. The child's resistance may also undermine the stability of family life, by rejecting the ways in which the parent deals with their own anger and pain, but this disturbing force (in terms of confronting parental authoritarianism) is not specific to either avoidance or opposition. That is to say, either form of resistance may destabilise the family; it simply occurs in different ways, either overt (opposition) or covert (avoidance).

There seemed two modes of resistance open to children as a response to parental domination and control: the passivity of avoidance and the activity of opposition. A child's response may be both or either, this depending on the form of abuse as well as on their age, their size, their knowledge of outside help. Whichever mode of resistance is chosen and acted on, there is a presupposition here of the child's awareness of pain and suffering, and the recognition of this as being unjust in the struggle for freedom from it.

Avoidance may appear to the parent as adjustment or acceptance for the child seems to share the parental definition of the situation. The child however holds within themselves another view, one which seems right and just and which is in opposition to the parent. This opposition is not expressed in any overt way, for a variety of tactics are used to subvert and to sabotage parental strictures and attempts to control.

The child may form an alliance with one parent against another. This may be covert or overt and may be particularly prevalent in reconstituted families. It enables the child to call on one parent as an advocate against the other or as a protector against the other.

Or the child may join in a coalition with another sibling and undermine in a number of ways parental authority.

Alternatively the child may dissent from the parental definition of the situation, though aware of the conflicts, biases, omissions and injustices in the parental story. To the outside world they appear as conforming to the family view.

If the experience of oppression and domination becomes extreme, the child may run away. Running away gives the child emotional and geographical space. It is a form of psychic protest which enables the child to struggle to reassert some control over themselves and their sense of identity.

Opposition is a more active form of resistance. The child confronts the domination and control of the parent by struggling to change it. This can only take place in conflict and requires considerable commitment, understanding and desperation on the part of the child. Opposition is where the child undermines the power of the parent and the family. They may report their own ill-treatment to the police, to Social Services, to the NSPCC or to an

adult who is in a position to protect the child and who is outside the family.

The child may confront the authority of the parent. They may 'answer back', 'cheek', argue incessantly or even strike back at a physically violent parent. Or the child may develop a coherent and diametrically opposed view of the world, or a form of self-development into which the parent cannot intrude. It embodies both a negation of the parental view with a constructive use of the child's talents and capacities.

The purpose of this discussion has been to identify the separate dynamics of the patriarchal capitalist family. They incorporated three elements: values as they inform behaviour, attributes of domination and control, and the struggle by the child to resist. The account was also intended also to develop an understanding of how parental behaviour is informed by the political economy and how this becomes acted out within the hierarchy of the parent-child relationship, and the various ways in which a child may fight back. Hence working from within this model, the following questions could be addressed in further research.

1. What is the relationship between male power and its expression and acceptance within the family? This would require a conceptual categorisation of what is meant by power to make it empirically operational.



2. What is the relationship between the experience and the organisation of waged work and the quality of the care of children within the family?
3. How does an adherence to gender stereotypes effect the quality of family inter-relationships?
4. What is the relationship between ideas of authority, discipline, rules and principles as they influence children?
5. What is the relationship between the form of abuse and the age and nature of the child's resistance?

These questions direct the focus of attention in a very specific way. Yet they are not based on a narrow area of interest since they relate to the various different structures and influences that penetrate family life. There is a relationship between work experience, between gender, ideas of authority and punishment and child abuse.

From such questions it is possible to develop a hypothesis or a series of hypotheses and to explore their interconnections with each other. This would require interviewing in depth a number of families; and it would clearly be advisable to have a control group for comparative purposes. So using the Ideal Type of the patriarchal capitalist family in conjunction with a Social Service Department's organisational definition of an abusing family i.e.

one which has been placed on the Child Abuse Register, responses could be compared with families not known to a Social Service Department.

Alternatively (and more interestingly from my own perspective) an individual (defined as abusive) could be selected for an extensive exploration of their life history. Such a method could potentially provide a wealth of material. There is a long sociological tradition using this method, particularly as developed by the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology. Plummer, in discussing the inheritance of the Chicago School, comments on its approach to social problems, that life needs to be studied as it is lived i.e. as a concrete experience. That life is a development, a becoming, and that humanity inhabits the world of both the material and the symbolic. And thirdly, there is a concern with the marginality of many social groups. Plummer quotes Lewis on this issue: "Concern with what people suffer is much more important than the study of employment because it lends itself to more productive insight into the human condition, the dynamics of conflict and the forces of change." (In Plummer 1983 p.59)

The life history is then a full length account of one person's life. Ideally it needs to be backed up with observations of the subject's life, interviews with friends and reading of letters, photographs etc. This does not mean however that it is a purely subjective account. For example, Thomas and Znaniecki's 'The Polish Peasant' was written to show how important theory was to a

sociological understanding of life. Hence in the course of their analysis, they develop a distinction between values and attitudes, propose the concept of "the definition of the situation" and contextualise an individual's life in terms of traditions, customs and beliefs of a social milieu.

Hence using this method would enable the themes of alienation, patriarchy and mystification to be explored as they are experienced by the individual. In this way the 'sociological imagination' may be harnessed, and we may come to an understanding of the relationship between the personal and the political.

#### **Theory Applied: Reassessing the Beckford family**

Theory also informs practice. Using the theoretical framework discussed in identifying inequalities arising from alienation, gender and mystification which is embedded in patriarchy, a different analysis develops. This may be appreciated by critically re-assessing the case of the Beckford family, as I hope to demonstrate in the following.

Jasmine Beckford was born to Beverley Lorrington on the 2nd December 1979. On the 5th July 1984, Jasmine was taken to St. Mary's Hospital, west London. She was already dead. On the day following her death, the pathologist's report stated she had died as the result of severe head injuries. His examination found multiple old scars consistent with repeated episodes of abuse. He

wrote in his conclusion that Jasmine had been subjected to repeated and systematic acts of severe physical violence and neglect (Appendix 1. Panel of Inquiry 1985).

Jasmine had been subject to a Care Order made out to the London Borough of Brent in September 1981. Such was the concern expressed by the Council of Brent, the Health Authority, the media and the public, that a Panel of Inquiry was set up. It began its proceedings on the 28th March 1985, the same day that Morris Beckford, Jasmine's stepfather, was found guilty of the manslaughter of Jasmine and of cruelty to children, and Beverley Lorrington, her mother, was found guilty of wilful neglect. The Panel of Inquiry submitted its report nine months later in December of the same year.

The Panel's terms of reference were: to investigate all the circumstances surrounding the death of Jasmine, to determine what action had been taken by Social Services and what support was given to the family, to determine whether any steps should be taken arising from the Inquiry's report, and to inquire into the coordination of services to the family. This was with a view to making a number of recommendations for future legislation, and to aid governmental guidelines and professional action (Ibid p.1). (1)

The work of the Panel is impressive in its detailed examination of the circumstances which led to Jasmine's death. The Panel eventually made upwards of seventy recommendations, covering the

responsibilities of all the agencies that were directly or indirectly involved with Jasmine and her family. Neither did it hold back on criticism of individual workers. The magistrates at Willesdon Court, the foster parents, the social worker and her senior, Brent's Court Officer, the health visitor and members of the Social Services Committee all received criticism. They stated the blame must be shared by all the agencies in proportion to their various statutory and legal powers. They concluded that Jasmine's death "was both predictable and preventable homicide", (Ibid p.287) and that the fatal mistake lay in the "ill-conceived programme of rehabilitation" (Ibid p.290).

The evidence given to support their thesis is logical, well argued, derived from examination and cross examination of the witnesses. Though stated not to be a trial, in form and content it bears a close relationship to one. It is a detailed examination of the process of decision making within a Social Services Department and of the network of communication between members of the different agencies. Yet there is no consideration of the nature of abuse as it was manifested in the Beckford family, and because of this the focus is more on agency reaction, rather than on seeking to understand the violence. In this it duplicates the other agencies' lack of focus. The Beckford family was violent, but outside of the Criminal Court's intervention, there was little acknowledgement of this.

Running through the Panel's analysis are three important critiques. These are firstly and obviously the many procedural and organisational errors that were woven into the fabric of the decision making process by the various personnel. Secondly, the observation as to how the importance of the 'blood tie' informed social work decisions. Thirdly, the social worker's 'naive' belief in the parents.

Taking the first criticism first, the Panel made great play on the mistakes made by the various organisations, implying in the process that if such errors had not occurred then Jasmine would have remained alive. But if the social worker had known that Morris Beckford was not Jasmine's 'real' father, or the Court had not added the rider that they hoped work would be done to "rehabilitate" the family, or the medical records had not temporarily been mislaid, or if the social worker had seen the child more regularly, would these factors have really made much difference? These seem rather effects which are derived from the failure to understand the nature of the abusing family.

Secondly, the Panel considered the evidential importance of the "blood tie" as influential in the decision to return Jasmine home. They saw this as being a product of social worker training, but this coincided with public opinion, since this belief (the bond of parent with child) was also held by practically every agency involved (Ibid p.90). The social worker was therefore doing no more or less than reflecting the hegemony of the family; that the

child is the property of the family, and that the 'natural' family is a preferred way of living. (These are issues that I have extensively discussed previously.) Given this structure, the social worker was constrained to act in a 'typical' way which would reinforce this, and work towards returning the child home, regardless of the risk or the cost to the child.

Thirdly, the Panel referred to the Independent Social Worker's report and commented that she was indulging in a partisanship of the natural parent's rights (Ibid p.97). The magistrates at Willesden exhorted that the social worker should do her utmost "to put the family back together again" (Ibid p.99). There was an observation that the solicitor, although ostensibly acting for the child, was actually acting as advocate for the parents. For example, he complained about the lack of access to the children by the parent. (2)

Thus we see all four agencies adopted the same perspective, one which sought to reunite the family despite the evidence of the high risks involved. The Panel put this down to a belief in the 'blood tie', which is correct but incomplete, for the analysis also requires an understanding of the hegemony of the structure of the family and the consequential power relationship between the parent and child. For the notion of the 'blood tie' also includes the idea that the child belongs to the parent and that therefore the parent has a right to the child. Hence the Independent Social Worker's comment that the parents "desperately want the children

home". But she did not stop to ask why and in whose interests this would be. The child had become invisible. She had become as an adjunct to the parent.

And since the parent in that process then becomes as if the victim, and as if in need of protection (from the social worker), the parent becomes the client. They become as if the child. In the Beckford family there was a confusion between the needs of the parents and those of the children, and the social workers duplicated and reflected this distortion. They worked on the child within the parent, to parent, yet the parents were unable to do this. There was a lack of separateness between the Beckford parents and the children, so it becomes understandable in this confusion that Jasmine is not seen. She had become invisible and objectified, for she represented for the Beckfords their own hidden anger, rejection, violence and self hatred. This may be further understood if we consider Morris Beckford's evocative comment to the Independent Social Worker, "There is nowhere to put the baby when she cries."

The Panel also made extensive reference to the social worker's 'naivety' in believing the parents' own accounts. Yet again she was not alone in this readiness to believe. The court also failed to call to the witness box Beverley Lorrington at the Care Hearing. The Independent Social Worker accepted the Beckford parents' explanation of stress due to their poor housing conditions. She therefore wrote that the injuries of the children were due to a



combination of physical exhaustion and low blood sugar. In this she avoided confronting the fact that the ultimate responsibility for harming the children lay with the parents. Apart from her readiness to believe, the housing factor did not cause the injuries, because even after the Beckfords were rehoused, Jasmine continued to be assaulted. Morris Beckford was violent regardless of his housing circumstances, and this was allowed to continue primarily because it had not been recognised. Rather the focus of social work intervention had been on the parents' inability to communicate and play with the children. The question of the violence that this family contained was never confronted.

It is therefore a psychologistic account that evaluates the readiness to believe in the parent as naivety or gullibility. As I have argued previously this is an example of mystification, and is therefore a structural problem. It is socially constructed and originates in the hegemony of family life where children are taught to respect and obey their parents at whatever cost. The agencies and the personnel who showed such readiness to believe in the parents' account, were still subject to their own internalised (and dominated) child. They were still mystified. They had not experienced their own necessary disillusionment, which would have helped in the assessment of the Beckfords.

### Further observations

The Independent Social Worker's report was particularly important in the assessment of the Beckfords, when presented to the Court at the Care Proceedings. She refers to Morris Beckford's "demands for instant and perfect service", and that "he was quite obsessional about everything being just right and on time", and "that he was overcome with rage when the baby would not settle". Elsewhere there are references to Morris Beckford's obsessional cleanliness, e.g. he had once smashed the oven door in when he had found a speck of dust on the door. There are references to Beverley Lorrington's awareness that the house had to be kept clean, that meals had to be prepared on time, and that she felt tied to the house. She says later (after Morris Beckford was in prison) that he expected instant obedience, that he viewed any attention she gave to the children as spoiling them. She also said that she had covered up for him, in that she did not send Jasmine to school because she often had bruises (Appendix F.1).

There are a number of points that can be made about these aspects of the Beckfords' family life. Firstly, Morris Beckford's concern with housework is quite clearly a way in which he was able to keep his partner under control, but it can be understood in another way. For example, in a discussion of the symbolic importance of housework, Davidoff points out that dirt is perceived as disorder and in eliminating it, the world becomes organised according to a particular view. And women are of particular importance here since

they are the first line of defence against this symbolic disorder as well as actual disorder. Yet because they are marginal and ambiguous, being seen as closer to nature, they are themselves unclean and therefore threatening themselves (Davidoff in Barker and Allen 1976). In this can be understood the frantic efforts of Morris Beckford to keep his external world in some sort of order, given the potentially explosive nature of his inner world.

Linked with this and to be found in the same report were references to Morris Beckford's obsession with work. Again Davidoff's interpretations are of use here, since as she points out, order and conformity are linked with class. Her arguments thus parallel those of Chordonow and Tolson, discussed earlier. Just as we saw the urge for cleanliness and instant obedience were expressions of the gender structure, work can be seen as a struggle for respectability and acceptance. We are told that Morris Beckford worked from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. with only two breaks for meals, and that he often did the work of three men.

There was no further exploration of this or indeed any comment. It was not considered that he may have been exploited at work and that this too may have affected his relationship with his partner and his children. Yet as I have discussed previously, the worker's participation as a labourer is profoundly alienating. Work subordinates the individual to the needs of capitalism, so that production creates profit and that profit can accumulate. In this process the worker's needs become subordinated. Leonard points out

that preparing for wage labour in the reproduction of labour power takes priority, so that eating, sleeping and leisure centre on the necessity to be ready and able to work (Leonard 1984 p.85).

There remains one further issue that needs exploring and that is the permeation of violence in the Beckford household. There is throughout the report no explicit discussion of this, other than in the 'event' framework, i.e. did he or did he not physically abuse Jasmine. The violence of Morris Beckford was therefore never tackled. How then did the social workers work with the family? Apart from the Beckfords being rehoused, and as we have seen, this was understood to be the main problem and therefore a prerequisite to the children being rehabilitated with the family, there was a concentration on developing parenting skills. The Beckfords were therefore encouraged to play with the children, to talk to them and to each other. They were helped with the redecoration of the house, budgeting and housework. In these areas the Beckfords apparently showed a steady improvement.

What was actually going on was not picked up, primarily because the focus of attention was misdirected. For example, in November 1982, Beverley Lorrington tells the social worker that she is thinking of leaving Morris Beckford and taking the children with her. Yet eight days later at a Case Conference it is said their marital relationship had improved. The parents meanwhile refused to attend this meeting, and thus effectively closed the opportunities of

communication. It seems the marital relationship received little if any attention at all.

Hence the Beckford family exhibited to an extreme degree the observations made previously on how abuse may be understood. The agencies involved believed that the stress of bad housing and an inadequate grasp of parenting skills caused the abuse. There was a stress on the "blood tie", and the children were seen ultimately as the property of the parent. Hence the drive for rehabilitation i.e. to return the children to the parents so that the family could be "reunited". At the same time the violence, the silence of the child and Morris Beckford's long hours of work and his simultaneous domination and exploitation of Beverley Lorrington were not perceived, and were therefore not confronted.

Analysing the Beckford family in this way would have meant the focus of work may have shifted. His violence may have been confronted, the couple's relationship with each other would have been considered as it affected their parenting, and Morris Beckford's own exploitation by his work could have been sympathetically reviewed. At the same time the silence and invisibility of the child would have been noted, together with how the children could or could not resist abuse.

And what of the social worker's own consciousness? What does a social worker need to be aware of in her relationship and involvement with an abusing family? Bearing in mind that abuse is

the experience of hurt and pain, either emotional or physical, and that this takes place in a relationship based on parental domination and exploitation of the child, what should her attention be directed towards and how should she use herself?

To write of using oneself, is to indicate the importance of self-awareness, and to know the way this consciousness of self informs one's analysis and understanding of the situation. I do not mean by this knowing in a psychological way, but rather how one perceives, feels, understands and analyses according to one's theoretical and political consciousness. Because not to know this prevents one from knowing the other.

The social worker must therefore examine her own attitudes towards abuse, punishment, violence, authoritarianism, and know also their origins, that is, how she came to hold these beliefs and how these beliefs inform her own understanding of the family and abuse. She needs also to reflect on her own attitudes to the family's drive for privacy and how the child in relation to the parent, may be treated as property, as objects, and how that consequently in varying degrees and forms, this may result in the abuse of the child.

She need also be sensitive to the child, and how she is seen by the child. She must be aware of the total presence of that child, of the emotional content of the relationship between the child and the parent and how it is expressed in tone of voice, physical contact,

proximity, the looks (or not) between them, and the use of metaphors and accounts of events, which may reveal or conceal the truth. By considering the totality, the phenomenology of a family, the social worker may thereby be able to tune into the atmosphere. What is that atmosphere? Is it emotional? If so, of what kind? Are there indications of persecution, manipulation, denigration, misunderstanding, authoritarianism, objectification and indifference?

Apart from her own work on developing a knowledge of self and a sensitivity towards atmosphere, there are other signs which may indicate abuse. What is the parental response to social work intervention? Do they object to the social worker wishing to speak to the child on their own? Do they attempt to intimidate the social worker? If so, is this because the 'privacy control mechanism' is being confronted, and is the opposition because in the process of the social worker opening up the family, there may be a demystification of patriarchal power and their 'definition of the situation'?

And how does the parent see the social worker? Is she seen merely as an agent of the State, or as having the potential to act in a humanitarian and freeing way? How closely to typical gender behaviour do the parents adhere and what are their attitudes to and understanding of discipline, punishment and violence? In particular, what is their relationship with each other? Is it based on control and domination?

Such questions are, as I have indicated before, informed by an explicit theoretical perspective. They direct attention at issues which are far broader than parental behaviour, since parenting is a reflection of the economic and political order, and is of ultimate economic significance.

### **Confronting violence**

As I have indicated, my premise in working with abusing families would be to confront and work with the violence. Unlike Britain, both Canada and the United States recognise that domestic violence is a public problem, and one which requires joint action by the government and by the voluntary sector. For example, in Canada, the Ministry of Community and Social Services provides funding to expand the services and shelters for battered women and their children. It seeks also to promote public and professional education, training, policy development, research and coordination between different disciplines and to fund projects and conferences. (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 1984) The discussion that follows is based therefore on the Canadian experience.

In a study of programmes for working with "assaultive" men, Browning identified 30 projects across Canada. Although they developed from within the Women's Movement and from a feminist critique of patriarchy, both the Federal and the Provincial Governments were supportive in terms of funding and publicity.



(Browning 1984) A large number of such groups favoured court mandated treatment for violent men in the family. Mandating men to attend groups which challenged male violence was seen to represent the unacceptability of violence. It meant that men experienced pressure to change, but also there was simultaneously a public campaign that it was possible to change to non-violent ways of relating. Although some men would and could attend voluntarily, it was found that the pressure had come from a partner who was threatening to leave. Once this was removed, as for example if the woman actually did leave, then the motivation was lost. In this, the responsibility for ensuring the man attended lay ultimately with the woman, for it was her decisions that were crucial in influencing his attendance. This was unacceptable to some groups. Other groups were also not willing to assess men who were standing trial on assault charges, for they found from experience that some lawyers had used this to secure an acquittal. Again the element of pressure was lost that seemed necessary to ensure men did attend a group.

Brown<sup>ing</sup> also reviewed the philosophy of treatment that informed groups working with violent men. All group leaders saw male violence as learned anger, rather than a marital problem. They perceive male violence as part of an attempt to control and dominate women. It is an expression of power and promotes an adversarial attitude towards women. It is also an expression of 'emotional illiteracy' in that for many men, the only feeling they are aware of, is anger. All feelings get lumped into feelings of

anger, whether sadness, fear, vulnerability or hurt (Ontario 1984). Group work therefore focused on helping the man to accept personal responsibility for his violence, and to show its destructive nature both to himself and to others. It aimed to teach ways to express anger or frustration and to increase awareness and the expression of other feelings and it sought to develop a different view of male-female relationships.

Men had a variety of defences to deny their own responsibility. They would blame the woman, they would deny that there was a problem, they minimised injuries, and they blamed alcohol or societal pressures. Group leaders again and again had to reiterate that men had choices and that they can choose not to hit, not to shout, and not to manipulate.

Working alongside them, but separately, are Women's Groups. Women who attend these may or may not have partners who attend men's groups. Yet despite the support given to women who are subjected to violence in the family, it is still difficult for them to ask for help. As we saw in the Beckford case, it was only after Morris Beckford was jailed that Beverley Lorrington was able to talk of his oppression. Given this, how is the social worker able to recognise the assaulted woman? One worker at the Ontario Conference advocated that the worker should always ask directly, especially if the woman makes reference to her partner's quick or bad temper (Ontario 1984).

Another project established in Toronto works with women in the community. 'Education Wife Assault' is a non-profit organisation committed to helping prevent wife assault through education, and to enable people to understand the experience of assault and how she can be helped. The project starts with the assumption that violence and abuse has no place in the family and that the problem is not a private family matter. Project workers advocate that the community should and must take effective action. (Small and Greenlee 1986)

They found that whereas men had to learn to take responsibility for their own actions, women had to learn not to take the blame for the activities of the male. They needed to recognise their fear which arose out of the abuse of his power, and to accept that they too have choices. They needed to see that to experience oneself as a victim, systematically over time, removes self-esteem to such an extent they feel powerless.

What is important in these developments is the cooperation between the Women's Movement and the more progressive factions of the State and the voluntary sector. For women, this does not mean abandoning a commitment to women. Virtually every group working with violent men in Canada acknowledged the influence and the strength of the Women's Movement. Many have drawn up a programme of cooperation between women who provide refuges and the anti-sexist male groups who provide radical therapy for violent men. For example,

'Emerge', founded in 1979 in Boston, issued a statement drawn up together with feminists. It set out a number of guidelines:

1. That no group shall exist without there being shelters for women and children in the immediate vicinity.
2. Programmes for abusing men must share the same philosophy as feminism.
3. Where funding is short, then a shelter is always first priority (Schechter 1982 p.261).

To conclude, group work with violent men challenges the beliefs that it is another's behaviour that causes men to assault. The responsibility for the violence is placed on the male, at the same time as traditional notions of gender behaviour are challenged. In this way new norms are held out for male-female relationships, which are based more on equality. Additionally, since these groups work on a self-help basis, there is a deprivatising of what was a personal problem. In the process of violence becoming shared and also challenged within the group, connections are made between the personal and social manifestations of violence and the beliefs that legitimate them. Group work encourages ways of relating between men which differ from the traditional competitiveness and aggression often exhibited. The personal becomes politicised, and the focus of work is on the destructive nature of patriarchy and a consideration of how to change it.

**Summary and Conclusion: Some Personal Comments of a Political  
Mature**

If fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources  
of fascism, eros belongs mainly to democracy.

Adorno, "The Authoritarian Personality" (1950)

This thesis has discussed an alternative understanding of child abuse. Investigating the nature of child abuse has necessitated critically examining the 'gestalt' in which it is situated. Current discourse on child abuse in terms of defining what it is, why it has happened, and the role of the social worker as an agent of the Welfare State, has been examined. The investigation has also included what is not usually discussed in 'conventional' explanations and descriptions: the absence of the child's view, the responsibility of the parent in terms of the potential to become self-reflexive and to thereby exercise some choices which may free themselves and their children from the pain of living under capitalism.

However, the main critique of this thesis is the observation that, apart from the feminist analysis of sexual abuse, child abuse has been depoliticised. All child abuse, whatever form it takes, is a political issue. It embodies behaviour which reproduces inequality and hierarchy. The parent can abuse the child because the parent is physically, psychologically and economically in a position of power over the child. Alice Miller writes,

For millennia it has been permissible and customary for children to be used to satisfy a wide variety of adult needs. They have provided a cheap source of labour, an ideal outlet for the discharge of stored-up affect, a receptacle for unwanted feelings, an object for the projection of conflicts and fears, compensation for feelings of inferiority, and an opportunity for exercising power and obtaining pleasure.

(Miller 1986 p.312)

The question is, why should this happen? This thesis has struggled to engage with this issue. At the beginning, I referred to Geuss' account of the Frankfurt School, who advocated that the experience of pain and frustration can motivate the individual to understand and then to seek to change the social order. This is the point from which an analysis from within critical theory may begin. However, self-reflection is no simple matter. There are different levels of awareness and hence understanding, as I hope to have shown in my discussion on beliefs about the family and states of awareness.

Child abuse is therefore more than a moment in the relationship between parent and child. It is not simply a matter of the parent losing control, neither can it be adequately understood by perceiving it from the viewpoint of an organisation. Organisational definitions are ultimately political because they advocate the viewpoint of the powerful, delimit the angle of view, and thereby act as in a gate-keeping role. Organisational definitions of child abuse are definitions for the use of organisations.

Once one rejects this perception, and takes the viewpoint of the child (the powerless), then abuse can be seen as part of the everyday life of the family. The family, as produced by the social order, and as reproducing the social order, incorporates ways-of-being - of patriarchy and of alienation and mystification.

I have argued that parental domination and control is a reproduction of the mechanisms which inform patriarchal capitalism. This is not to say that the parent is culpable or to blame, since the parent and the family reflect patriarchal capitalism. Patriarchal capitalism is founded on authoritarianism, since it is fundamentally organised on an inequality - between those who own wealth and thereby can make decisions as to how society will be organised, and those who don't. This authoritarianism, which is derived from an exploitation of power, is mystified so that the foundations to the political-economy are not clear. It is necessary, in order that this should remain so, that the majority of the population are confused as to where their 'true interests' lie. So public debates are structured around concepts of efficiency, profit and competition, not care and cooperation.

This system thus produces an existence for the adult world, which, without a critique, reproduces itself in the family. The adult world experiences, in different ways, a deprivation and an exploitation of their needs. Given this, it is unlikely that they, as parents, are able to know and thereby begin to fulfill their

own needs, and it is likely that consequently, children will become the targets for their anger, frustration and confusion.

Yet critical theory contains within itself, the realisation that emancipatory change is possible. The beginnings of a praxis may be formulated from such an analysis, in the sense that the individual has the potential to move forward to a different way of being and working.

This thesis was born out of my concern for the invisibility of the child and an apparent lack of awareness of the experience of abuse. When I first began my investigation in 1982 there was very little public concern. Since that time there has been, arising out of the number of child deaths, an increasing publicity given to child abuse. Child abuse is now recognised as a social problem. At the same time there is trenchant criticism of social workers. It is a commonplace observation that social workers have been simultaneously criticised for intervening in the family and also not protecting children. Hence the pendulum swings from one side to the other. At the moment of writing there was massive publicity given to the policy and procedures of Cleveland Social Services, which in cases of suspected child sexual abuse have reacted by removing the child swiftly. Yet as I have argued throughout this work, child abuse is more than a question of procedures. Children will continue to be abused no matter how 'correct' the procedures are.



Writing and investigating this thesis has created enormous difficulties. It required a massive commitment of time and effort, for the majority of the work was undertaken in the evenings, weekends or during holidays. During that time I immersed myself in the subject matter, and was at times permeated, or so it seemed, with the experience of abuse. It caused me great personal anguish.

Yet the personal pain needs to be understood politically. One learns from pain. What has motivated me in this extended discussion of the nature of child abuse has not only been to understand this pain, but also the political and social foundations to a subjective experience. In so doing, I have necessarily shifted my focus around to include in the explanation the political as well as the personal, the activities of the State as well as the economy and the social worker, and the child as well as the parent. I wanted to understand how these aspects of the social order are manifested in consciousness, and how these in their turn affect the quality of the care of children.

Carmichael writes we have to cherish our pain as the touchstone of truth, transform it into love and use it to create relationships and a social structure for peace (Carmichael 1986). Only then will children become truly valued, and responsibility for their care and development be seen not just as a family affair, but be shared within the community. Their future depends on it.

## CHAPTER 9 - NOTES

1. Jasmine's abuse and subsequent death at the hands of her parents shares similar characteristics with other abused children. The DHSS study of Inquiry Reports concerning the deaths of children between 1973 and 1981 makes reference to good work interspersed with numerous omissions, mistakes and misjudgements. They point to vital information being missed, the need for health monitoring, and the ineffective communication and a lack of expertise among workers (DHSS 1982). The circumstances of the Beckford Report also had an additional and poignant meaning for me, in that I worked as a team leader at the London Borough of Brent while the Panel was sitting.
2. This observation confirms the analysis by Dingwall, Eekelar and Murray (1983), who similarly came to the conclusion that solicitors hired to act for the child often behaved as if they were the advocate of the parent.

## APPENDIX A

### EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS ASKED IN INTERVIEWS

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Tell me about your mum/dad.
3. What do you like/dislike about them?
4. Are your parents strict or do they let you do what you like?
5. Do you think boys and girls are treated differently by their mums and dads?
6. Why do you think parents may be unfair/unkind to their children?
7. Do you ever get hit? shouted at? pushed around?
8. What do you think about that?
9. How do you think you'll bring up your own children?

NOTE. These questions indicate areas of interest. In the conversation some may have been rephrased or omitted if the child spontaneously referred to them themselves. The questions cover the child's view of their parent, gender issues and the child's understanding of abuse and punishment. I did not ask direct questions about sexual abuse, but two young people spontaneously referred to this, and one told me his mother had been raped by her father.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA, AGE 13 YEARS

Shall I tell you about some of the problems I've had. Most of my problems started when my mum and dad split up. When I was about five, they started having sort of arguments, my dad walked out one day. I remember that well. They were just petty things that blew up into a big row. Then my mum started going out with this man she used to work with. He was a right pig. He was Moslem and they got married in Islam, sort of thing, and both of us used to hate each other. What my mum found out was that she wasn't married to him. She got married in Islam but because she was pregnant, they couldn't call it a marriage. So he used to beat me and my sister, anything that happened, it was my fault, from when I was six to when I was eleven.

Q Have you got a sister?

Yes, I've got one real sister, and two half-brothers and one half-sister with my mum, and with my dad I've got two step sisters, one step brother and one half-sister.

One day, it must have been about three months before I went into care, he came in expecting my mum to have his dinner on the table. She'd been looking after the kids all day, because it was the holidays and the two babies were ill. He came in and told her to get the dinner on the table. She asked him to wait a while. He started hitting her. I went out to my next door neighbour, and phoned the police, and the police came and took my half-brothers and sisters and then there was a big fuss. He tried to get them out of the country.

He couldn't do that, because my mum had his passport, and my brothers' passports. The next day she went to a solicitor to try and get them back. The next day he came back saying he was sorry, and she told him to get away from the house. She changed the locks and put a padlock on the door. (Continues with an account of her mother's struggle for the children.)

My step dad would beat me for something. My mum phoned my dad and told him to come and get me. My dad took me home and I had bruises all up my arm, all down my back, and all down my legs.

Q Did your mum try and stop him?

No. She joined in. When he went, my mum started.

Q Why did she do that?

Because they were fasting, and they were both in a bad mood and they expected me to be fasting. My mum told me to get my dad. He came and got me, and I was with him for four or five months. Things went from bad to worse. My mum sent my uncle around and my dad took me around to his mate's, a woman he used to know and I stayed there for a while.

My dad found me a school, and my dad went to court for him to try and get custody and they kept giving him temporary custody, but when it came to the main court case, they gave me back to my mum and they bound my mum over for a year. My step dad goes, "She's a good mother. She wouldn't do that," and all that rubbish.

Q What did you think of all that? Who did you want to go with?

My dad, but they won't let me. I still want to go with my dad.

Q Why's that? Do you know?

Because my mum tried to say he tried to abuse me.

Q Do you mean sexually abuse you?

Yes. She was blackmailing me and saying it as well. They took my dad to court over it, and my mum got an injunction out, saying I couldn't see him. They wouldn't let me see him. I didn't see him for about two years. Every week they were making me go to this,

you know Great Ormond Street? They were making me go there and in the end, I just stopped going there.

Q Were you going with your mum?

No, on my own.

Q To see a psychotherapist? Like a psychiatrist?

Yes. I was in a group with other children that had been molested and that.

Q So had you been molested?

No, but they wouldn't listen to me. So after a while, I went up to see my dad and I had lunch with him and that. I used to go up there all the time, every day when I was allowed out. Then one day I'd been up at my mum's and I'd left my mum's about nine o'clock Saturday night. My mum phoned up, and said that my sister had said that I'd been down at my dad's all night. So they used to keep checking on me and that.

They wouldn't let me go out and see my dad. They wouldn't let me go out, unless they had the time I was going out, the time I was going to get there, the person's full name, their age, their date of birth and their phone number. Until they had all that, I wasn't

allowed to go out. So I started to bunk off school. I don't think I've been to school for about two months in the past year.

Q What do you do, when you don't go to school?

I go to see all my friends. (Talks about her truanting.)

Q How do you feel now about your mum and dad?

I don't mind now, because when I go down to see my mum, my dad's usually there so I see him more than once a month. But the thing is, the home doesn't know this. My mum doesn't want to get married again, but she's got a really nice boyfriend now.

Q How do you feel about your mother hitting you now?

I don't know. One time, I turned round and hit her back.

Q Did that stop her?

No, it got worse. But then she began to realise the more she hit me, the more I was going to hit her back. The same with my step dad, when he hit me with the rolling pin, I picked up a stick and threw it at him and it cut his face. Because they kept hitting me and that, it gave me to taking things from them. I was taking money and that. That made it worse and one day they were fasting, and they expected me to have nothing. I'd eaten a chewing gum and



they started hitting. They phoned my dad and my dad came and took me. Then my mum kept phoning the police to try and get me back.

(Andrea then goes into a detailed account of how her father and step father fought over her.)

My step dad said while he was standing on my mum's door, said to my dad, to try and hit him there. He goes, "I'm not going to bother. You're not worth it." He turns round and says, "Oh yeah, and Andrea's worth it, is she?" Dad just turned round and punched him in the face. My step dad wouldn't do anything, and then as my dad walked off, he ran after him and started hitting him and that, so my dad just threw him down the chute (rubbish chute).

My step dad's got nothing to do with him. Now he's trying to say my mum's a no good mum and all this. Now me and my mum is getting on alright, now that he's left.

Q Do you think that you could ever go back and live with your mum?

I don't want to, because when I was living with her, she'd got one child under five, one that's five, one that's eight and my sister's twelve, and when I was living with my mum, I used to get bunged off with all the work, and bunged off with looking after the kids. Now I'm not there, my mum has to get a baby sitter, so she doesn't go out now.

Q Would you like to be in a foster family?

No, I'd never be able to settle down. I don't know, no I don't know. I wouldn't be able to fit in, so that if something happened I'd blow my top and they'd probably kick me out. If someone winds me up, I just blow my top. (Describes a fight she had with a girl who called her mother a slag.)

Q Do you believe in physical punishment?

No, I'm like my dad, I don't believe in hitting people. I don't like fighting either, but if anyone says anything to me about my family, I'll go for them. (Andrea continued with her account of the fight and then moved on to her dislike of school.)

Q You're in a children's home at the moment, do you like it there?

It's alright, but I can't settle there. I want to go back with my dad, but they won't let me. I'd like to be near my family. If they put me in a long stay home, I know that I wouldn't be moving here, there and everywhere. But if they put me in a foster home and it didn't work out, I'd be moving from one place to another. In a long stay home, I'd be there all the time. I'd know what I'm doing and I could plan ahead.

Q Who have you got on with the best, that you think really cares for you?

There's one girl in the home and she's been there for a year like me. I knew her for a couple of years before that as well. If we've got problems we go and talk to each other and help each other, because neither of us can talk to the staff. The staff seems to think that anything that you do is wrong, but anything that they say is right, in their books it's right. (Continues with a description of the children in the home.)

Q It sounds like you have a good time there?

The only time we have a laugh, is when we're annoying them. It seems they think it's alright for them to tell us what to do, but if we do something they don't like, they say, "Oh, you shouldn't do that, it's wrong."

Q You come over as quite tough, Andrea. You know what's said about what women should do and what men should do, the difference between their roles. Have you heard about that?

Yes. I don't believe in anything like that. It's a load of rubbish. When I was about eight, and I was staying with my dad for a weekend, there was this woman married to my dad's friend. Instead of looking up to him, he looked up to her. He used to think she was the apple of his eye. She used to go out to work and

he'd work half the day and she used to expect her dinner on the table when she got in. She expected everything to be perfect, that there wasn't one speck of dust anywhere, and the house had to be redecorated every week.

Q What did you think of that arrangement?

If I was over her, I'd tell her where to put her decorating. But then he realised that she was having an affair with her boss, and it was his house, and he was paying the mortgage on it, so he kicked her out. She came running back to him, so he got an injunction that she wasn't to go near the house.

Q Would you go along with it the other way round, the woman looking up to the man?

It's not right either way. People laugh at me because me and my mate want to be mechanics. People think I'm a shy little girl. Most of the people I hang around with are boys, but people don't understand that when I'm out, they wouldn't know I was a girl, because I go out and play football with them. (Relates story about a girl who flirts with boys and then continues talking about being in care.)

Q Do you think children should be in care?

Some need to be away from their parents, as well as with their parents. I go to my mum and stay there the first weekend in every month and when I get back from there, the Monday afterwards, my dad comes down for his visit. So I've got a fun packed weekend at the beginning of the month, and I've got something to look forward to at the beginning of next month.

Q How did you come to be in the children's home?

Well after my step dad left, things began to get out of order, because when my mum came to be a one parent family, she used to take things out on me. The more she took out of me, the more I took it out on the little ones. We just could not get on. Things were always going wrong, and things got out of hand. I'm piggy in the middle. Anything they want, I have to do. Anything my mum wants, I have to do.

Since I haven't been living with her, we've been getting on really well. If you see them an hour or two every day, you get on better.

My mum expects me to grow up as she didn't. She had to grow up, because her mum didn't have a lot of time for her. There was no time for her, because she was the only girl in the family. She wants me to grow up thinking she's got loads of time for me.

My dad said to me, before they split up, I shouldn't grow up the way she wants me to. I'll grow up the way that I want to, but my

mum can't settle. She expects me to do what she wants to do. Anything that happens is my fault. My mum says, "That's your fault. You shouldn't have ignored me." The thing is you can't say to someone, you should do this and that, because the more you tell them what to do, the more you're going to ignore them.

(Talks about discipline in the children's home and how she copes.)

I can't stop reading, since I've learnt to read. I read any books. I even read the dictionary if I haven't got anything to read, or I start writing a load of rubbish. When I read stories I get ideas for my own stories.

## APPENDIX C

### DETAILS ABOUT THE CHILDREN INTERVIEWED

#### Children not in Care

Allen aged 14	No contact with father. Mother full time housewife and mother. Interviewed in youth club.
Andrew aged 14	No contact with father. Mother full time housewife and mother. Interviewed in sister's foster home.
Catherine aged 16	Father a shopworker. Mother barwork. Interviewed in a youth club.
David aged 13	Father a social worker. Mother a teacher. Interviewed at family home.
Debbie aged 15	Father a manager of a clothes shop. Mother a cleaner and also barwork. Parents divorced. Interviewed in youth club.
George aged 14	Father a cab driver. Mother a housewife. Interviewed in youth club.
Ian aged 16	Father 'in advertising'. Mother a social worker. Parents divorced. Interviewed at family home.
John aged 14	No contact with father. Mother housewife. Interview terminated after ten minutes.
Peter aged 15	No contact with father. Mother housewife. Interviewed in youth club.
Simon aged 15	Father a barrister. Stepmother a journalist. No contact with mother. Interviewed at family home.

## Children in Care

Andrea aged 13	Father a market trader. Mother housewife. Parents divorced. Interviewed in office.
Antonia aged 9	No contact with father. Mother housewife. Parents divorced. Interviewed at a children's home.
Bob aged 16	Father a factory worker. Mother an ambulance driver. Parents divorced. Interviewed in office.
Della aged 16	Father's occupation unknown. Mother a care assistant. Parents divorced. Interviewed in her bedsit.
Josey aged 16	Father dead. Mother housewife. Interviewed in office.
Kelly aged 14	Father's occupation unknown. Mother housewife. Interviewed in foster home.
Stacey aged 14	No contact with father. Mother housewife. Interviewed at foster home.



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